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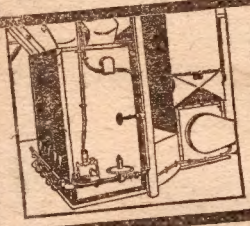

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JANUARY 1938

VOL. 10 No. 3

WESTERN ACES

A. A. WYN, Editor

HARRY WIDMER, Managing Editor

An ACE Magazine

COLT CRUSADER *(Complete Novel)* . . . . . ROLLIN BROWN 10
Although Breck Lane knew that a trailman's first job was with the cattle, at daybreak he would be a fighting man—shooting it out with his best friend's killer.

THE WASHOE KILLER *(Short Story)* . . . ROLLAND LYNCH 37
The gunman from the Washoes gets his come-uppance from a younker who uses the killer's own .45 formula.

A MESSAGE FROM MESCAL *(Short Story)* . CHARLES W. TYLER 44
When Deputy Johnny Bates matched gun magic down Mescal way, it looked as if his next address would be "General Delivery, Hell."

BLACKJACK BOUNTY *(Short Story)* . . . . SAMUEL TAYLOR 55
The cowboy loyalty of Blackjack Jones could not be worn out by years of bitter struggle or knocked out by the impact of death-hungry lead.

LOBOS OF THE LUCKIMUTES *(Novelette)* . VICTOR KAUFMAN 66
When Steve Tracy led the cowmen to stamp out the grass greed in a condemned country, he fought a hidden menace—the drygulch lead of lurking lobos.

DESERT DINERO *(Short Story)* . . . . ROBERT W. COCHRAN 86
An old desert rat finally strikes pay dirt—by following a buzzard's shadow.

THE WRECK PAN 89
A meeting place for Western enthusiasts.

GUN CUB FROM HELL'S GAP *(Short Story)* . PETER GERMANE 94
A trigger-swift youth from the Vultures drops a charge of hate-loaded dynamite into the feud-sizzling town of Cibola.

Cover by William Soare

This is an ACE Magazine—
See Page 8

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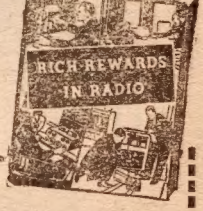

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29x4.75-20	2.25	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.60	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.60	1.25
5.25-17	2.65	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.65	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.65	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.65	1.35
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.35
6.50-17	3.00	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.00	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.00	1.45
6.00-18	3.50	1.45
6.00-17	3.15	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.15	1.40
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30x3½	$2.10	$ .95
31x4	2.70	1.25
32x4	2.70	1.25
33x4	2.70	1.25
34x4	3.00	1.35
32x4½	3.10	1.45
33x4½	3.20	1.45
34x4½	3.20	1.45
30x5	3.40	1.65

H. D. TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x6	$4.00	$1.95
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32x6-8P	6.70	2.95
32x6-10P	7.70	2.95
34x7	10.25	4.65

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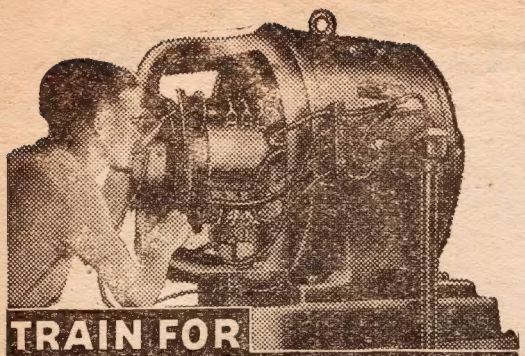

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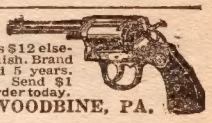

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"I'll Prove *in the first 7 days* YOU can have a Body like Mine!"

No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED to make the offer he makes in this announcement!

DON'T get the idea that it takes a lot of time and hard work for you to get smashing strength and powerful muscular development! And don't fool yourself into thinking that you need dumbbells, stretchers or any other such contraptions.

Both of these ideas are all bunk—and I have PROVED it. All I need is **7 days to** prove what I can do for you! And I don't need any apparatus either. In fact, I have no sympathy with apparatus at all—don't believe in it. It is artificial—and it may strain your heart or other vital organs for life!

NATURAL Methods Are All I Need

On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way. No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for MY body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of **Dynamic Tension** can do for yours!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I used to be. Then I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat-chested, spindly legs, arms like pipe stems.

I was worried—and I had a right to be. I decided to study myself, to do something about my body. Then I made a discovery. I found a new way to build myself up. A way that was simple, natural, quick and sure! "Dynamic Tension" is what I called it. I put this secret to work. And in a short time I had the kind of body you see here—the body which has twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what **Dynamic Tension** has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man **can** and **ought** to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story and theirs—I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

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I'd like you to know what **Dynamic Tension** has done for me—what it has done for others—and what it can do for you! This little coupon will bring you my free book which tells all about it. There is no cost or obligation of any kind—and no one will call upon you.

I just want to put into your hands proof that I can do for you what I have done for so many thousands of others: give you broad powerful shoulders, biceps that bulge with smashing strength, a chest which stands out solid and muscular, and an evenly-developed body that will make others look like dwarfs next to you.

Will you gamble a stamp to win a body like mine? Then mail this coupon TODAY. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 491, 115 East 23rd Street, New York.

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Gamble a stamp today. Mail coupon for free copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows you from actual photos how I have developed my pupils to my own perfectly balanced proportions. Where shall I send your copy? Write your name and address plainly on the coupon. Mail it today to me personally.

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This valuable cup stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.

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Gland Sufferers

Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Sexual Weakness, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at Night are only some of the ailments, differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

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Countless numbers of men suffer from these ailments and other physical shortcomings without knowing that very frequently they are caused by prostatic failure.

MANY DOCTORS ENDORSE MASSAGE

Massaging for the alleviation of Prostate Trouble is as old as time, and some of the most outstanding authorities in the medical profession recommend massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences Vol. VII 3rd Edition.)

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INVENTOR

USE "PROSAGER"

—a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home.

It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

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Each month we receive scores of unsolicited letters of gratitude and appreciation from users of the Prosager—the following letters are typical of those received. Mr. S. W. Harrison, 446 N. Main St., Brewer, Maine, writes: I have received wonderful relief by means of the Prosager. It certainly has made a new man out of me. Mr. J. W. Geary, 18 Poinsettia Ave., Sebring, Fla., states in his letter: Received the Prosager May 20th, my prayers have been answered, I have used it six times and am a different man. Mr. A. P. Hoffman, 8104 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, O., writes: The Prosager is helping very much and would not be without it. Mr. S. V. Kindig, Box 213, Fairplay, Colorado, states: I feel 20 years younger and I would not take anything for the Prosager if I could not get another.

We do not publish our users' letters unless we have their permission to do so.

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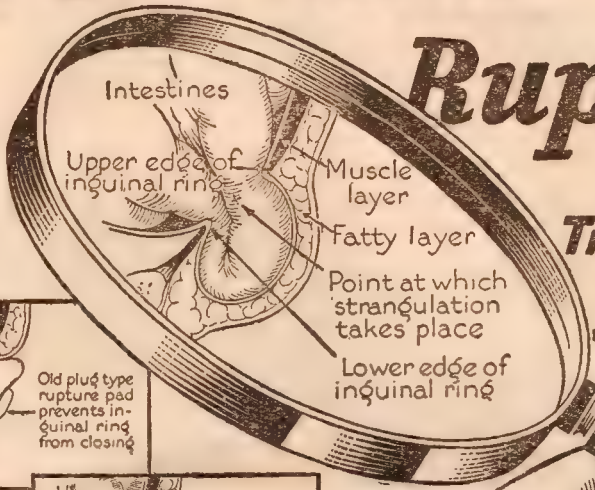
Romance, Variety, Glamour

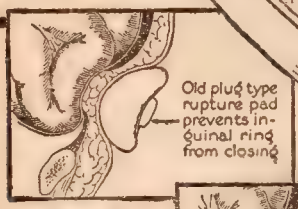
SECRETS
Real Stories About Real People

LOOK Inside Your Rupture

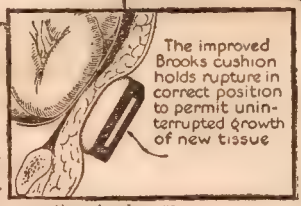
For the Truth about a Cure



THIS MAGNIFIED PICTURE SHOWS how the enlargement of the inguinal ring (a natural opening in the abdominal wall) allows omentum and intestine to push out and come down.



WRONG WAY
When you wear a steel truss and stand erect the pressure of the spring is greatest. In this position some truss pads will push into the opening.



RIGHT WAY
In the Brooks, however, the natural resiliency of the soft rubber in the Automatic Air Cushion and the gentle pressure of the pliable supporting bands provide continuous protection without gouging.

Dotted lines show how the Brooks AIR-CUSHION expands, contracts, and flattens under pressure. Unquestionably the finest supporting device ever conceived for the retention of reducible hernia.

Help Nature Heal

DO YOU see that bulge of intestinal loops pushing out through the muscular wall of the stomach (abdomen)? That's what inguinal rupture looks like.

The outside wall is skin and fatty tissue. The black wall inside that appears to be broken is the muscular wall. It is not broken. It has a natural opening called the inguinal ring. It is through this ring that your inguinal rupture first appears. Sometimes this ring will close up. If it closes up while your rupture is out you have a "strangulation" and an immediate operation is imperative. If the rupture is being held back at the time the ring closes, then you have what the doctors call a "spontaneous cure." Over 22,000 Brooks users have given voluntary reports of such results.

Now this so called Spontaneous cure is nothing more nor less than the work of Nature. Not in all cases, but in many, Nature will strengthen the muscles and close the opening so that the intestine is held back without further need for any kind of support.

WARNING Because of the success of the Brooks Invention there have been many imitations. Brooks Appliances are not sold through stores, agents, or by other mail-order houses. Protect yourself by ordering direct under our fair Ten Day Trial Plan.

But if you will look at the first small picture you will see that such a thing is impossible if the pad presses into the opening. It is also impossible if the pad doesn't fit just right as it will let a part of the rupture push out.

The Brooks truss invention for the support of Rupture holds in exactly the right position as shown in the second small picture. It is especially designed with this in mind. The soft rubber AIR-CUSHION never presses in—yet it never slips. It gives comfortable and firm support in every position of the body whether you are asleep or awake. Actually it helps Nature Heal for it does not prevent a natural flow of healing blood to the weakened muscles.

You can wear a Brooks Appliance on trial and see for yourself whether or not it helps Nature in your case. If it doesn't, you owe nothing. If it does, the Appliance costs you only about as much as you would pay for an ordinary "store truss."

Millions of Satisfied Users

Over three million Brooks Appliances have been sold on the Trial Plan. This proves their satisfactory performance. Over six thousand doctors have ordered for themselves and their patients. You can join this great army of happy people. Send the confidential coupon today for Free Information.

NO MORE FEAR SEND COUPON

Put fear behind. More important, put rupture pain and discomfort out of your life. The Brooks invention not only brings you safety, but it has enabled thousands to know the blessed joy of Freedom from Rupture.

FREE Information and Free Trial

There is no charge for full information. There is no obligation to buy or even to try a Brooks. But you owe it to yourself to get the facts. Find out in simple, easily understood terms exactly what the Brooks can do for you. Send your name and address. The Brooks Company will send their illustrated book absolutely free in a plain envelope. At the same time they will tell you how to get a Brooks for ten days' trial.

CONFIDENTIAL COUPON
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167-K State St., Marshall, Mich.

Gentlemen: Please send me your Book and complete information on the Proper Support of Rupture. I understand there is no cost or obligation for this information and that my inquiry will be treated in confidence and all material mailed in plain envelope.

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Address .....
City ..... State .....
State whether for ☐ Man ☐ Woman or ☐ Child

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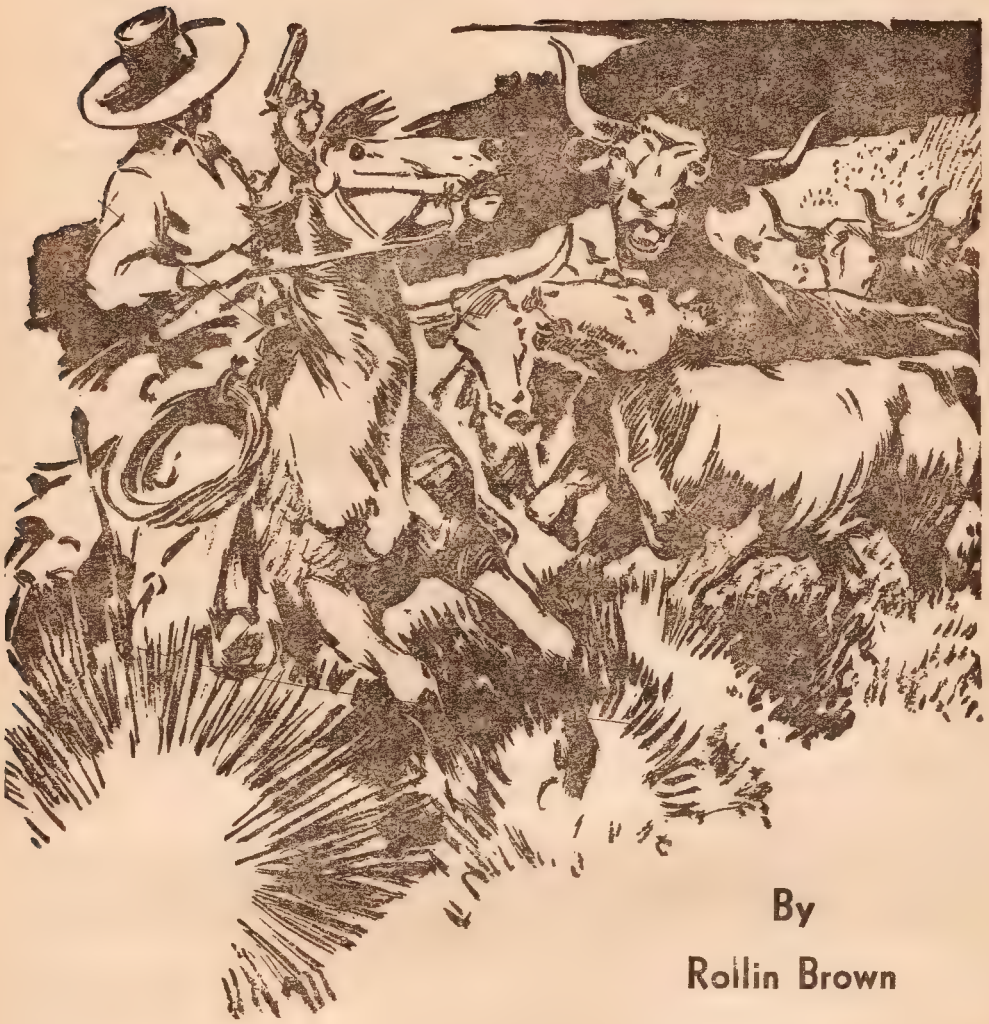

By

Rollin Brown

CHAPTER I

Concho John

ELEVEN men in a group, dusty as they had quit saddle from a last hour's pounding ride into town, shoved through batwing doors and lined up at the bar.

A lantern-jawed trail driver said, "Drink hearty, sons! Because tomorrow daylight we're pullin' home, and it's a long dry spell to the Red." He winked at the barman, and explained, "Three thousand head delivered on the Republican. Sure, I never see a Texas boy that wouldn't ride through hell

Carry on for Concho John! In that black night of hell every pound of thundering hoofs brought this message to Breck Lane, segundo of the Long Rail. Yet even though a trailman's first job was with the cattle, Breck knew that at daybreak he would be a fighting man—shooting it out with his best friend's killer.

Ahead of that rolling thunder six-guns flashed in the hands of the two night guards.

at the drop of your hat. But they're a plumb, plain spooky outfit when it comes to frost."

A boy took his glass at a swallow and reached quickly for the bottle. His fingers loosened and he swung around instead. "No, I'll take my fling on that little spinnin' ivory ball yonder, I reckon." He grinned. "I allus had a hankerin' to go home rich."

A piano rattled, and a girl with paint-pot cheeks looked at the boy with quick, expectant eyes, but he passed. Another rider said, "Sure thing, Babe—let's swing a hoof! I'm a dancin' man from ol' San Antone, burrs in fetlocks that never been combed."

A glass crashed over the bar-rail with a brittle splinter of sound. The piano player swung into the tune of *Organ Man,* carrying the melody with one hand while he took up the smoking butt of a cigarette in the other and inhaled one deep breath.

From the night outside came the steady tramp of boots, making one way or the other along the uneven plank walks that lined twin rows of false, board fronts, rutted hoof-trampled width of dust between. Little longer than two years, this had been buffalo grass. An engine hooted from the stockyards, where the last car of a trainload of four-year-old single-wintered beeves was being loaded, shoved east through the night over tracks.

This was late August, shank of the season. The town of Ellsworth, Kansas, had blossomed like a mushroom from the prairie, lived its wild, flaming hour. Now shrewd-seeing eyes read the signs of its withering.

Sid Payton, owner of the Palace, made an idle gesture to the saloon room before him. "Like Abilane," he said. "Or Newton. Newton lasted a single season. This year the grangers have located the best of the surrounding bottom country; another spring, there won't be room to hold a herd within five miles of the tracks. And Wichita ain't no better off than we are here. No, Dodge is the next trail town!"

He sat at a secluded corner table at the far end of the room—a big, square-jawed man with blue stubble showing underneath the smooth-shaven surface of his skin. His hands were strong, long-fingered, deft. He toyed with a deck of cards before him, a racked stack of chips at elbow, and shook his head at a perspiring barman, who came up wiping beer foam on an apron.

"Not tonight. Get one of the regular dealers if it's a private game that's wanted. Usual limit. Can't you see I'm busy?" he added.

He looked back at the man sitting across the small round table from him. "I've got no kick. There's been good money here," Payton continued. "But I'm readin' the signs—I'm through. Two months from now none of this will be here. I'm moving the Palace, bar, games and fixtures, out to Dodge in time to get set up another spring.

"Maybe that don't mean much to you; it don't to me. The overhead is heavy, the season short. There's strong competition, and if the house percentage is cut too big the games get the name of crooked."

The man across from him, a lank-shouldered, range-marked fellow, laughed. "So what else are they, Sid?"

"Sixty-forty. Which means you get two chances against three for your money." Payton shook his head. "Two years ago Sharpe & Reeves cleared thirty percent, over and above everything, on their beef contracts. Sure, it's a plunger's business—but what is this? Forty thousand dollars to set up this joint in the first place, another ten now to pull it down, fifty more out at Dodge to get reëstablished.

"These trailhands pull into a town, a pocketful of money, the clothes on their backs; for maybe three months' time they've eat beef, beans an' bacon, washed down with muddy crick water. But if a joint ain't all mahogany, plate glass mirrors an' polish, these here boys just hike on up the street somewhere else. I've had money put up on the side with Sharpe & Reeves; I know what I'm talking about. In Dodge, I'm branchin' into the contract business. That's what I wanted to talk over with you, Charlie."

CHARLIE REPSTOCK, boss that year for the last of Concho John Cortell's herds up the trail, looked back with questioning eyes. "So what?" he asked.

"You helped old Concho John put up his herds this year," Payton said. "Somewhere down on the Nueces, a horse fell with him and broke old John's leg. He's a hard man to get along with, so I'm told. Hard-headed, hot-tongued and quick to find a fault. It left you to receive sixty-three hundred head of mossyhorn coasters, the hardest cattle a man ever drove, to road-brand and see to every detail of gettin' two herds started, bosses and men. Then up into Palo Pinto County, to put up three thousand heavy beeves for Army contract.

"In the end it left you with the skimmings of the year thrown into a fourth herd—a parcel of broke-down men and untried youngsters for riders, no one knows what for horses. That's what you got out of it, Repstock, and the kind of a herd you brought up the trail this year!"

"All right," Charlie Repstock said. "So far it's all the truth. I worked like a dog down there. I wasn't left five hosses to the man; I didn't have a regular trailhand in the outfit. Three stampedes before we crossed the Cimarron; forced dry drives because it was so late in the year. We straggled

in here, same as afoot. Yeah, that's what I got out of it!"

Sid Payton looked at the thronged room again, the file of peelers and Texas *brasaderos* lined up at the bar, others packed around the games and tables under heavy smoke-hung ceiling light.

A dealer said, "Seventeen pays off; double money on the odd. Place your chips on the next turn, gents!"

The wheel spun with a sudden whining rattle, a girl laughed shrilly among the men at the bar. The piano thumped a steady rhythm that rose or diminished through the other noise, and Payton looked back at Charlie Repstock with careful, guarded eyes.

Repstock was thirty, angular, sinewy, with deep-cut weather lines about his mouth and eyes. His brows were bleached the color of faded hemp or flax, a flat-crowned ragged hat cuffed back on his head. His eyes were pale, watery.

"There's other ways to do business," the gambler said. "Old Concho John's a reb, which means he'll never amount to anything in the Army contract game himself. Washington's got just that much prejudice left. With Sharpe & Reeves, it's different. Maybe twenty herds pass through their hands on the way from Texas north or at the railyards here. The butter spread on the bread is theirs; they take out the real money.

"I happen to know Sharpe & Reeves are advancin' Concho John Cortell up to seventy thousand dollars cash this fall on two Indian agency contracts for another spring, gamblin' they'll fill their own hands at Washington when bids are opened next January."

Repstock shook his head. "So what?" he asked. "You might as well talk plain, Sid."

SOME of the speculative look left Payton's eyes, like a man who has picked up his cards and knows what he has.

"A trail boss for Concho John might be able to do a lot to delay his herd on trail," Payton said. "A man in your position this past spring would have been worth a heap of outside money to enemies of Sharpe & Reeves—I reckon so much should be plain as daylight to you, Repstock. I'm going into this game. Sharpe & Reeves will have main quarters in Dodge next year. I'm going to cut some of the bottom out from under them, and skim off a little of that top cream for myself."

Repstock's pale gaze dropped and focused on the bony knuckles of his hands, knotting and balling up again on the table's edge. He breathed heavily.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

Payton said, "You got up better than twelve thousand head for Concho John this year. Passed through Sharpe & Reeves' hands, that stock will gross close to a quarter-million dollars. Concho John ain't yet back from an agency delivery on the Cheyenne. But if that herd don't pass delivery you'll be the man to blame for the grade of beef you received for him on the Nueces this past spring. So what does Concho John Cortell pay a man for the kind of responsibility you've had to shoulder—trail boss's wages maybe?"

"Yeah. Yeah, trail boss's wages," Repstock muttered huskily. "Since last February."

The gambler smiled with straight, tight lips. "Generous, ain't he? All right, I'll add the same wage on the side. And I'll pay you one dollar bonus for every head of cattle received in Texas which fails to cross the Kansas line into Sharpe & Reeves' hands next year. That goes for the John Cortell herd you drive next year or any other under contract to Sharpe & Reeves. It'll be an open battle between us, come next spring. Concho John is just one drover on the trail, but his contracts are that much of the underpinning below Sharpe & Reeves."

Repstock said huskily, "I never liked him nohow. Sharpe & Reeves are a hidebound outfit, Yankee-smart—I

never had no use for 'em, neither. I'm your man, Sid!"

Nothing changed on the gambler's face. He motioned up the beery bartender, said, "Couple of glasses and my private bottle. Right away." The casual sweep of his glance across the room caught gray eyes fixed on his own, a youngster's raw trail-burned face. Deliberately Payton looked the youngster up and down, without recognition.

The room was filled with boys like this; half the trailhands up from Texas with more than half a million head of beef this year were youngsters hardly yet reached their majority. It took young bones to stand the knocks, fourteen hours a day in the saddle coupled with night guard, drouth, stampede and flood.

Payton said, "That's fine, Repstock. I don't know when Concho John will get back in town. But I understand Sharpe & Reeves took over your herd today, paid off your men, and put a holding crew of their own in charge."

"Sent out their own bookkeeper to make the payoff," Repstock grumbled resentfully. "Seems Sharpe & Reeves don't trust a man more than is necessary. Not that I ever pushed a worse crew of broke-down saddle bums and wet-nosed babes up this trail. Still by custom, payoff is the trail boss's job. My own orders are to wait here for Concho John."

"That's all right, wait for him," Payton said. "But things will be different now." He drew a wallet from an inner pocket, flipped loose two century notes, and added, "This will help you pass the time."

FROM the corners of his eyes, Payton saw scarred stub-heel boots stop beside the table. His head came up with a sharp hard look, and found the burnt-faced youngster standing there looking down at Repstock with steady gray eyes that had tiny burning flames kindled in their depths. A tall-framed boy—maybe twenty, Payton judged—with sandy hair and a knob of a jaw; cold sober, with a dogged sort of determination written all over him.

Without looking at Repstock, Payton said, "Some friend of yours, I take it, Charlie?"

Repstock's bent head snapped up, reddened. He shoved the two century notes deeper into his pocket with the fingers of one hand. His lips lifted slightly, stiffly, from stained teeth; weather lines cut deeper into his face under the smoky light.

"Yeah. Yeah, one of that crew I was just speakin' about," Repstock said. "One of the wet-nosed babes. Most of the saddle bums managed to keep one hoss up an' strong enough to carry weight, but this lad come trailin' the drag in afoot. Yeah. Still want to be a cowboy, Lane?"

The youngster shook his sandy head, not denying the fact, but something else. Sid Payton, judge of certain breeds of men, noticed that the youngster's eyes did not flinch or deviate, but remained steady as gray steel.

Looking at Repstock, the youngster said, "Remember that dawn above the Brazos Fork? Wind hit us just afore sunup, sticky-hot as the blast from an open oven, so heavy a man had to lean against it to keep saddle, scuddin' up a square foot of dust and blow sand to every yard of atmosphere. A man couldn't breathe, nor see the ears of the horse under him. But three thousand head of cattle was movin', bawlin', driftin' with that blast.

"It was up to this crew of yours, these saddle bums earlier drivers on the trail hadn't wanted, loafers and the youngsters others had left home, to keep the herd bunched and do the best they could. Except for his bandanna, a man's nostrils would have clogged up. Most of us was left half blind for a week to come. But somehow them cattle was kept bunched—except we was missin' a boss.

"In the thick of it, I just happened to stumble on this boss of ours; I thought one of the boys had got throwed and hurt. Our trail boss was

lyin' there in a little sheltered gully, face down, with his mount tied in the bushes and a slicker wrapped over his head to keep out the dust and sand.

"Sure, next day, this trail boss of ours was there on the job, countin' cattle and proddin' the boys on up the trail, cursin' them that was useless because they was half blind." The sandy-haired boy shook his head. "He was a hard trail driver. Stampedes wore us down; then we hit low water and forced dry drives. With this boss we had never stood night guard; there was always a change of fresh horses waitin' his saddle.

"Me, I never seen Concho John himself. But he was owner; it was his cattle we was drivin'. That was all we needed to know; our job was to drive cattle. I figured this loud-mouthed bully we had for a boss must make up to Concho John in other ways none of us knew about. Maybe his loyalty—"

Repstock shoved the table violently and stood up, big-knuckled hands clenched. "That'll be enough from you, you sniveling half-baked peeler!"

SID PAYTON made no move at all; his eyes never left the sandy-haired boy. Something in the depths of Payton's eyes glinted brighter. He could admire courage wherever he found it, the same impartial way he had of judging men, usually correctly. The boy stood face to face, shoulder to shoulder, with Repstock now, as tall, but lankly formed, all of thirty pounds lighter. Payton saw a muscle in the back of the youngster's cheek quivering, but his voice remained steady as stone.

"There was gossip back along the trail," he said. "Some that knew him figured Concho John would never have put men behind cattle mounted like we were, but maybe his trail boss had pocketed a handful of change by buyin' a scrub remuda of navvie ponies that was never intended to reach Concho John's eyes at railhead and the end of the drive. I don't know about that. But I know Concho John ain't the man sittin' across from you here, Repstock, handin' out yellow-backed century notes.

"Sure, I'm done, I been paid off, I'm through drivin' cattle for Concho John. By that same token I'm no longer respectin' you, Repstock, as a man or his trail boss—"

Payton's voice cut in with iron-hard suddenness: "Careful! Don't either of you boys start a gunfight in here!"

The youngster said, "I won't!" His fist opened and slashed Repstock flat across the face. For three seconds Repstock stood like a man stunned, the finger marks of that hand laid livid white on the red of his skin. Suddenly there was no other sound in this room, except the dying rattle of a spun wheel which none noticed now. This town had a hound-dog nose for a fight. Then Repstock went for his gun.

The boy struck with a short left jab that doubled his body under it, caught Repstock in the neck and slammed him into the table.

Payton said, "Not in here, Charlie! Don't get me wrong!' His voice was still cool, iron-hard. Standing, Payton caught Repstock's gun hand across the table. Repstock tried to break the grip, raging blind, slung the weapon skidding back across the floor, and rammed toward the sandy-headed youngster with piston-driven fist. The youngster countered with straight body blows. Repstock smashed through, caught him in the ribs, the mouth.

The boy gave ground; he was lank and supple. Payton, cool observer, noticed the youngster's gray eyes steady as they had been all along. He knew Repstock would have shot the boy, knew now that by all the laws of trail and brawl Repstock's weight and strength would batter and break him, and somewhere later there would still be a shooting. It was one of the times when Payton felt disgusted with fate and the kind of men necessity forced

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him to hire, because he knew men.

The crowd was roaring, howling, "'Rah for Texas! Concho John's men!" Others piled in from the walks outside; this street was quick as mercury to record trouble or a fight. A great barrel-chested man with a snow-white beard tucked into his shirt slammed through, stopped and yelled, "What's goin' on here? Who says Concho John's men?"

He went shouldering through, the bellow of his voice lost in new uproar. The sandy youngster had collided backward into the crowd, striking straight and hard, but giving ground. Somebody pushed him from the rear, and he fell into Repstock wide open. Repstock saw it coming, slugged a savage hook that struck, pitched the boy sidewise and staggered him to one knee. Still the sandy youngster's eyes never left Repstock. He came up groggy, legs widespread, fighting.

The crowd took a new breath. A trailhand whirled, said, "Who pushed that boy like that?" But he didn't need to ask; a weighted fist swung up, and sent the man sprawling back into the mob. Another trailhand swung. It was a match in power; in an instant a dozen men were fighting through the crowd. Sid Payton watched the sandy boy drive through a right that caught Repstock between the eyes. After all, he would have liked to see this fight out. He shook his head, reached for a gun; there wasn't time. A flying bottle smashed.

The roulette layout crashed over, spilling forgotten and unnoticed silver under trampling boots. Trail-husky voices roared. These men had faced long miles of hardship, eternal monotony of saddle, dust and bawling herds. They spent their money here, gambled, fought, caroused, and wanted to forget. Through the mêlée of it, stormed a great barrel-chested man with a snow-white beard torn from his shirt, waving wildly—and Sid Payton saw that Concho John was back in town.

He thumbed the gun in his hand—four shots that took out the center lights and left the room black as tar. It was the quickest way he knew to break up such a fight.

CHAPTER II

Trouble for a Trailhand

THE lockup at Ellsworth boasted four cells in the rear of the building housing marshal's and sheriff's office, adjoining court hall. A great voice boomed through flimsy board partitions and iron-barred windows.

"How much bail, I'm askin' you? All right, all right! Who said I wouldn't pay it? When I want a man, I want him, don't I? What good is a rider to me locked up in a cage? Do you think I'm hirin' parrots? All right, all right! Get your keys!"

Shambling boots crossed a strip of board floor, dirt, followed by the thump of a giant's tread. Pale early sunlight filtered through an opened outer door. A little rat-faced man shambled ahead down a space of corridor and, wordless, thrust key into lock of the last cell, clanged door open and retreated as he had come. Breck Lane lifted a battered, bruised countenance to eye the big barrel-chested figure filling the cell door behind.

The man tucked the stray ends of a snow-white beard down inside the neck of his shirt. "Well, what's keepin' you?" he roared. "Does it take a special engraved invitation to invite you out of this place? Or have you sold your saddle for a bed? All right, all right! I seen Charlie Repstock do a heap worse to a man.

"But now get this an' get it straight!" he continued without pause. "There's two hundred head of north-wintered saddle stock over on the head of Delay Crick. Delay Crick, I said. All right, all right. Get over there, pronto. Start that stock downtrail for Texas afore another sun sets. Three boys there will help you.

"You got six weeks' time to shove through to Uvalde County, an' you

be there. Don't be late a day. Don't you lame no stock on the way, or, by jumpin' juniper, I'll take it out of your pay! Got that straight? Well, what's the matter?"

Breck Lane stood straight before him. In his boots Lane was six feet one, sandy, lank; but even so this big white-maned giant of a man towered three inches over him. "Somethin' happened to my money," Lane explained. "It was stole, I reckon. After lights was shot out somethin' hit me on the head. That's all I remember; when I woke up here, I'd been stripped. I got no money to pay fine or bail."

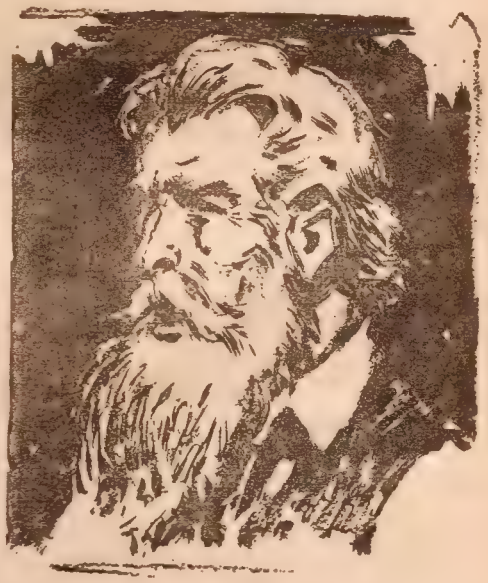
"What of it?" roared the other. His eyes were slits in leathery weather creases, shrewd and sharp as flint. "You're trailin' for Concho John! He looks after his men. An' don't you ever figure ol' Concho wrong. That was Repstock's mistake! Six weeks from today have them hosses in Uvalde County at the Long Rail spread. Get there with them hosses; that's all you got to worry about. You're in charge. Tell 'em at Leach's livery corral to give you a hoss!"

He followed Breck Lane out the jail corridor with a thumping tread into the pale early morning. Ellsworth, the town shifted uneasily on its bed of prairie sod; this was zero hour of its day. The tumultuous night had passed, and another dawn hardly got under way. Gamblers from the night shifts were having supper, preparatory to going to bed; saloons were being mopped. A few bleary-eyed trailhands rode past on their way back to herds.

By ten o'clock new crews would be in from holding grounds, riding horses to a lather, another roaring day begun. Half a million head of cattle had come up from Texas this year.

CONCHO JOHN walked with a limp, grumbling from his throat. "I need big hosses under me, an' this was a runt of a pony. Stumbled after a wild steer in the brush, an' I spent two months on my back. Still this off-leg ain't knitted proper. That's when Repstock got his chance. I didn't have another man. I had to trust him to receive sixty-three hundred head on the Nueces, break of spring. Then three thousand head in the middle country, this last big beef.

"I don't know yet what Repstock got out of it—likely no more than a few hundred dollars to shut his eyes



when off-size critters an' scrub shestock sure to die on trail went through the count. But I know this last delivery on the Yellowstone lost me ten thousand dollars. There's plain hell to pay!"

He paused, looked into the gray straight eyes of the sandy youngster at his side. "I got friends here in town," he rumbled. "I know more about what happened last night than you know yourself. Here's expense money. Delay Crick, I said. Two hundred head. All right, all right! What you waitin' for? You're trailin' for Concho John!"

He turned in his tracks without another glance, and went thumping

into a board two-story building, lettered across its face:

SHARPE & REEVES—
CATTLE BROKERS, BUYERS

From inside the place his bellow carried into the street. "Where's Reeves? No, I don't want the head bookkeeper, nor the assistant to the assistant. I want Reeves! All right, all right. Then get him out of bed!"

The sandy-haired boy went on up the street. A wizened hostler at Leach's corral grinned, said, "Yeah, trailin' for Concho John!" and whistled through his teeth in a way that meant anything.

Two hundred head of solid-color saddle animals, bays, sorrels, blacks and chestnuts, lifted muzzles from the grass in Delay Creek. No pinto wall-eyed navvie ponies—these were trail horses, hardy, two hundred pounds heavier per head from the miracle of a winter in the north, leggy, hard-fleshed. A half-blood Spanish boy rode out from the herd.

"*Seguro,* Concho John's remuda," he said. "Me, I come from the Atascosa Fork. They name me Pete."

"Good," said the sandy-headed boy. "Start the herd driftin' down this crick. We're trailin' out!"

CALDWELL, on the Kansas line. Breck Lane bought a hundred pound sack of flour, six sides of bacon, some dried meat and a pair of pants. They had salt and twenty pounds of beans left in the two horse packs. He wrote down the price of each purchase in the back of a frayed old tally book, and subtracted it from the amount Concho John had given him, all except the pants. Pants went in a separate column, chalked against himself.

The Salt Fork of the Arkansas. The Cimarron, sandy, sluggish now between its banks, full of quicksand holes. The North Canadian, up from storms far out beyond horizons west, deep and swift with a hundred yards of swimming water. The horses crossed. The South Canadian. The Washita. Across "The Nation," land deep with grass. Riding home to Texas, never using the same horse twice.

"*Andulé,* bronco! Hey, giddy-yap!"

This was different from that plodding slow, interminable drive north, cattle snailing under choking eternal clouds of dust, drouth and stampede, riders half mounted on mangy scrub navvies that a crooked trail boss had bought to line his own pockets. This was trailing. The boy's back was straight. Five weeks, he figured now, and they would be down through middle Texas, shoving across into Uvalde County. Not a lame horse yet. He wanted to do the job up right for Concho John.

"How old are you, Pete?" he asked.

The half-blood Spanish boy looked at his brother, Anastacio, question in his brown slow eyes. Anastacio shrugged and grinned, shaking his head. "Mus' be the ol *patron* has it wrote in his book. Maybe I'm twenty, I guess. Pete was born the same year, but late in *Diciembre.*"

"Me, I'll be twenty-one. That's tomorrow," Breck Lane said. "We ought to cross the Red tomorrow!"

The fourth driver of them, a steady Texas boy, was usually silent, usually thinking of a yellow-haired girl that lived down on the Colorado. He was going home to her. His name was Joe.

"It's old enough to have a girl and get married," Joe said now. "Me, I'm the same. She made me promise the morning I rode away. I never looked at a girl around Ellsworth. Nor even at Caldwell, for that matter. I only drunk one glass of whisky. She's an awful pretty girl I got, down on the Colorado."

Breck Lane admitted, "I never had a girl of my own. But once before my older brother was married, I took his girl to a dance. I'll be glad when we cross the Red."

They did not cross the Red the next day, when Breck Lane turned

twenty-one. Four hundred yards of muddy-brown swimming water lay between flat bluffs, swollen from heavy cloudbursts along the headwaters, thick with débris and floating stuff. No rain fell here; the river banks were parched and dusty. While they waited, Anastacio called attention to a horseman on the far river bank. After a while of scrutiny, the man came wading out a distance, gesturing for them to cross.

Lane shook his head. "Tomorrow the water will be down. It ain't the same as spring with snow meltin' in the upper country and swelling the flow from week to week. We'll hold the horses here," he said. "I don't want to lose no stock."

They could see the man's white beard blowing in the wind, where he had waded out belly-deep to his animal, gesturing. He was a big strapping old man in the saddle.

"Might be Concho John himself," Anastacio suggested.

"No, there's others with white beards, big fellows, too," Breck Lane said. "I got these horses to look after. It don't seem safe."

The rider across river pushed his horse on, plunged deep and was swimming across to them. The current sent him angling downstream with its force. Before the animal struck solid footing, they all saw that Anastacio had not been mistaken and the man was Concho John. He rode up dripping, bellowing.

"What's the matter here? What's wrong? The passel of you blind, or what? I took rails down country, followed up the Red. Been waitin' here for you, past three days. I got to have this stock. All right, all right. What you waitin' for? Get behind them ponies. You seen me cross! You a bunch of yellow-bellies, or what?"

Breck Lane shook his head. "If that's your order, we'll put 'em in. But it don't seem safe to me. There's too much floatin' stuff that might snag a horse's legs. I don't want to lose no stock."

The old man purpled, roared, "By jumpin' juniper, you heard me, didn't you? Move them ponies, shove 'em in!"

"Yes, sir. But on your responsibility," Breck Lane said. "Here's the money you give me, except for what is spent and wrote down in the book. I'm no longer trailin' horses for you, I'm a ridin' hand obeyin' orders."

For a long, long moment the old man's flinty eyes bored into the gray of his. He gnawed at stray hairs of his snowy beard; turned suddenly in the saddle.

"Hey, you boys!" he yelled. "Here's your boss! I'm just the owner. Wait till he gives you word to cross! All right, all right."

He looked back at the sandy-headed boy, twenty-one years old today. Again a long, long, silent moment.

"I'm sorry, kid," said Concho John. "You'll do, I guess."

The horses crossed the Red next day.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW SEGUNDO

CONCHO JOHN stared into the coals of a fire, a great hulk of a man squatted back on his heels, beard thrown loose from the neck of his shirt.

"It's this way, kid." His voice was different, husky-low and somber. "It's a plunger's business, takin' cattle up this trail. The market broke last week, caught Sharpe & Reeves holdin' ten thousand head they'll be forced to winter in the north. It's a gambler's business, in a market full of wolves. But a man's got to go ahead. Sharpe & Reeves advanced me sixty-five thousand dollars on two herds for Indian agency contract next year.

"They don't hold the contracts yet; Sharpe & Reeves are gamblin' on a share of the government awards comin' their way next spring. Reeves is an old trail drover. A big slice of their workin' capital was pulled out

of the business sudden, right after that. Sid Payton money.

"A breakin' market is the time to buy. It's that way, son!" muttered Concho John. "I'd met a seller, old friend of mine from down on the lower Brazos. The dicker between us was for two herds of Brazos cattle. He'd got pinched short and needed cash. I had it for him in the safe at the hotel where I stayed—sixty-five thousand dollars, currency and gold. A board shack of a hotel. Sid Payton owned it.

"The safe was cracked that night; somebody set fire in the downstairs room. But the fire didn't cover it. That safe was cracked before fire glutted it. Anyhow we'd have found the melted gold."

Breck Lane stared at him across the fire. After a while he said, "I reckon I don't understand you right!"

Concho John looked up, voice all but smothered. "Lissen, kid! I'm broke, I'm done! All except for the Long Rail spread, down in Uvalde County, the land I own and breeder stock. There's six years on the trail!" He gestured with one big horny-skinned thumb to a puff of smoke that went up from the dying fire. "Not only broke! Kid, Sharpe & Reeves depend on Concho John to deliver sixty-five hundred head of agency contract stock up trail next year. They got to have it; my word's been give! I got no money. Understand now, kid?"

He rose beside the glowing ends of fire. Wind blew through his long white beard.

"All right, all right. What's keepin' us up like this? By jumpin' juniper, daylight comes almighty early on this trail! It always has. Can you drive these hosses four hundred miles in the next ten days, kid? All right, all right. See that you do it! Don't you lame a head! I'm leavin' you in the mornin'. Keep these boys with you, on the payroll. Keep your mouth shut!"

There was a changed look on the sandy-haired boy's face next dawn, a stubborn-jawed fighting sort of look. And Anastacio commented to his brother, Pete, "Twenty-one! He's grown up to a man, Pedro. Look and tell me, *quien sabe?* Remember sometime and we must ask the old *patron* if he thought to write our days in his book."

The Brazos. The Colorado. Nine days later two hundred head of leggy, hard-fleshed trail horses flowed down the sweep of valley into the Long Rail spread. Here was grass, shelter, rest, for tired, long-riding saddlemen. Three strangers stood in the dooryard, and Concho John swung corral gates open. But it was rare for him to praise a man.

"All right, all right," he roared. "You boys catch out five-six horses to the man! What's the matter? What d'you carry ropes for? You're riders, ain't you? All right, head down for Dimmit County. I bought a run-down outfit there, brand Running N Bar. The outfit tallies a thousand head on the books, but see you get me twelve hundred out of the bosque. There'll be strays clear to the Rio Grande. See you get 'em! Breck, I'm countin' on twelve hundred head!"

For a single hard-eyed moment, his flinty eyes probed into Breck Lane's. He was gesturing up two of the stranger boys with a wave of one big hand.

"All right, all right. What're you waitin' for? This here's your boss—riding boss for Concho John!" He looked at Breck again. "Get goin'!"

HE turned to the third stranger standing in the yards, a quiet, smooth-shaven man. His voice lowered. But passing, to rope out a big bay that had a tough dark stripe down back from withers to the root of his tail, Breck Lane caught words.

"Security?" Concho John was saying. "What the hell do you bankers want anyhow? Here's thirty-two sections grazing land, some of the best grass in Texas. I'm not askin' you for a loan of the hundred thousand

dollars the bare ground is worth. But I got to raise fifty till next fall."

The land lay beautiful, Breck Lane had seen, a kingdom of it, Concho John's Long Rail range in Uvalde County. Anastacio had pointed out far boundaries as they rode. Breck threw his rope and took out the bay, leading the animal back to his saddle.

The banker was saying, "Times like these we hesitate at twelve-month loans. The country's too unsettled; trail cattle are a gamble. But a short-time loan till spring now—that might be different. Say forty thousand."

Concho John shook his white-maned head like some old range bull, bleeding, fighting to keep his legs. "All right, all right. I'm buyin' cattle now, this fall. I got to have the money, and I can't get cash back from the trail before another summer. On the terms of a deal like that, your loan amounts to a purchase. That's what you're wantin', ain't it? Thirty-two sections of this land at hardly more than a thousand dollars a section? All right, all right." He choked. "Damn it, sir, you and your bank are a smooth-fingered set of robbers!"

Something rose and choked in Breck Lane's own tight throat. He tossed saddle on the bay and cinched. His voice was husky-thick.

"All right, boys! Let's move!"

Two days later, in Dimmit County, they were running mossyhorns from the brush. Out at daybreak, scouring down the land; into camp with a few wild-eyed gaunt head, long-horned, fleet as deer, others roped and pegged down in the brush, to gentle and wait help. A change of horses and a half-cooked noon meal—back in the saddle! Days did not end at sundown. There was a thin moon now, and cagy wild old steers were only quitting impenetrable thorny thickets after nightfall.

They waited hours, numb, cold, sleepy, hidden against black walls of brush where tracks showed cattle had been moving, waiting for a shadow, then another, stealing out to water. A hand on latigo, tightening cinch with a soft jerk; creak of stirrup leather as thighs found saddle. Quick rush of hoofs, ropes loosened, swinging, whistling with the cast—and then a hard-driven thud to earth, a strangled bellow, a puff of dust under thin moonlight.

"Here's one! Hey, give me help! He's got one foreleg over, rope around his chest. He's pullin' the legs offen my hoss; Hey!"

Another voice panting, laughing: "Help? Say, brother—does this look like a wildcat or livin' dynamite on my own rope? But two got away. That means another night!"

They were holding two hundred—three—five hundred head, moving down toward the Rio Grande. It took nightguard to hold the beasts, three shifts from dusk to dawn, the same as a trail herd. The broke-down Running N Bar hadn't branded in two seasons; stock was scattered everywhere, mavericks like jackrabbits. Eight hundred head. Then a thousand.

For no reason at all, the herd stood up from the bedground one night, stars like pin-points overhead, and like one animal started to run. Hoofs were thunder in an instant. Riders woke in the camp, ran, reached their staked night horses and were in the saddle, eyes still swollen half shut with sleep.

Ahead of that rolling thunder, they saw flash of six-shooters in the hands of the two lads on night guard. The night became opaque with dust. A man could only trust his horse, or cross himself as Pete and his brother Anastacio did, or hope for luck. Luck?

NEXT dawn they held less than two hundred head. These were the gaunt-flanked cows, youngsters and aged hoofsore beasts which had been easily rounded up anyhow. Breck Lane had not reckoned on a thing like this. He hadn't had four

straight hours of sleep, one hour after the other, in longer it seemed than he could remember now. He wanted to sit down here, roll over, shut his eyes and forget. He could have slept standing on his feet.

Half the time, somehow, the only thing he could think of was his shuck bed in the attic at home, the comforting sounds of his mother in the kitchen below and the old man out in the yard splitting kindling for the stove. He had written he would be home sure for Christmas. He kept remembering that.

"Pete, you stay here," he said. "You, Anastacio, go back for the horses and our packs. Move camp right here. Most of all, we gotta have fresh horses. Trail the remuda after us. Come on, the rest of you! Every head from this stampede that makes it back into his home range brush has gotta be worked out the same hard way again!"

Concho John waited—he depended on twelve hundred head from here. It was late October, nearly November now. Just five nights later, the herd ran again. Two of the crew were missing, sent down to work and gather what they could along the Rio Grande.

The steady-going boy named Joe caught Breck Lane's shoulder, swung him around. "I'm through! I never wanted to come in the first place. Through with you, and Concho John and these spooky, loco-crazy Dimmit County longhorns! If you ain't got sense enough to know it, we never can get twelve hundred head of cattle out of here, countin' all the mavericks above the Rio Grande. Not with six men of us, tryin' to drive an' hold an' gather all at once!"

"We still got horses," Breck Lane said.

"Look at 'em! Rode-down skin an' bones!"

"Still horses, trail horses. Not navvies!" Breck shook his head. "We ain't afoot yet. No, Joe, you ain't quittin'. You're the best hand I got."

"I wrote from that store where you bought the last grub. I promised my girl it wouldn't be longer than a month. She's a mighty pretty girl, with the softest yellow hair. I never broke my other promise."

"I wrote home, too," said Breck. "But now we got to gather cattle. This run ain't half so bad as the first."

November was ten days gone when old Concho John rode in at a sag-roofed shack that had once been quarters for the Running N Bar. He found there a note stuck under an empty tin can on a broken table, saying simply that the gathered herd had been started north, yesterday, the *9th*. Old Concho John looked gaunt, saddle-worn. Some of the flesh had sunk away under the seamed weather creases all over his face. He read the note signed "Lane" and picked it up and read again.

LATE next afternoon, he stood his horse on one flat bank of a dry wash gully that narrowed through a bottleneck, Breck Lane on the opposite bank, while riders pushed the cattle slowly past between them. At the count of every hundred, Concho John dropped one of a dozen pebbles in his hand into pocket, and Breck Lane did the same. Finally there was no pebble left, and to keep the hundredth count old John thrust up one finger. There were still some twenty head left in the dusty drag.

"Tally!" said old John. "Thirteen hundred, twenty-two head, I make it."

"Thirteen hundred, twenty-one," said Lane.

But it was rare for Concho John to give a man praise.

"All right, all right," he roared. "Get them cattle trailin' out! They're to winter on Long Rail. I bought two thousand other head, down on the lower Nueces. The brand is CV2. Pick yourself a fresh remuda at the ranch. Go after 'em. You'll find two new hands hired an' waitin' for you at

Long Rail, Breck. You'll need 'em all an' more. Don't let any man go!"

"Lissen!" said the boy named Joe, voice husky in the dust. "I got a girl over on the Colorado. I promised her. There's Christmas comin'."

"Christmas!" the old man bellowed. "There's sixty-five hundred head of cattle comin'. Half of 'em are lined up in sight, but I still got to find the others, three dollars under price. Only the bankers and them with loan money know how bad the market's broke up north. The rest of Texas swears next spring will be the best trail year yet. And I hope they're right," he added under his breath. "So long!"

On Christmas day they swam eighteen hundred head across the lower Nueces, still two hundred short of Concho John's estimate.

"There's bound to be strays we didn't find, buyin' out this CV2 brand the way Concho John has. It was the same in Dimmit County. Four of you boys hold the gather here. The rest of us will go back after 'em," Breck said. "Maybe New Year's, Joe. You're too good a man. I can't let you quit!"

New Year's—January. They were on the San Antonio. Then Matagorda County. February. Awards had been made in Washington for Army and Indian agency deliveries. Breck Lane knew that Concho John still lacked a thousand head of beef to fill Sharpe & Reeves' contracts.

"But anyhow, Joe, here's a breathin' spell," he said. "And it ain't so far up the Colorado from here. You go see your girl, and if you don't come back we'll lift a drink to you an' weddin' bells at the first trail town in Kansas."

"Drink hearty then. She's the prettiest girl I ever saw, her yellow hair just as soft as silk. I been thinkin', thinkin' of her. It's been almost a year—"

CONCHO JOHN rode in that night, a big, gaunt, shambling skeleton with a snow-white mane and beard. Again he sat with Breck, eyes moody in the weather creases, sunken hollows below lids, staring into the coals of a dying fire. His voice was slow, harshly soft.

"Breck, I ain't told you much. Nothin' of my plans. I got the last thousand head we'll need lined up and all paid for. That's up in Kimble County. But it's cost—it's cost me the Long Rail ranch, all my old holdin' ground. The market's still unsteady.

"Sharpe & Reeves don't know where they stand. Except Sid Payton has changed his little tin flute of a gamblin'-saloon layout for a big brass horn in this comin' season's trail business, buckin' Sharpe & Reeves with every cent he owns, right out in the open. Sure, Sharpe & Reeves got experience. They got a name behind 'em. But I don't know," the old man muttered.

"Me, I come up from nothin'. Everything lost after the war between states. I come out here to Texas with only the hoss under me, a pack and another followin' with my wife an' child. I'd always wanted a boy, but it was a girl she'd give me. A girl with deep blue sort of eyes, like the color risin' up into the sky when you see the first glint of a star prickin' through, and a way of smilin' just like her ma—that's when she grew up, a little older. It helped when I didn't longer have her ma."

He shook off old memories with the motion of his head. "The trail made me. Every cent I got. An' by jumpin' juniper, I ain't through yet!" said Concho John. "We'll move them two herds of Injun agency cattle for Sharpe & Reeves delivery over the Kansas line no later than the middle of March. Up there, Sharpe & Reeves handle on their own, to fill their own contracts with the Indian Bureau.

"I'm still ahead what breeder cattle I'm runnin' in Uvalde under the Long Rail iron. There's calves and yearling discard from these brokedown brands I bought out clean to beat the market. From such we'll

make up a third trail herd. Road-branded Long Rail! Don't you ever forget it, I ain't through yet!" he roared. "There's still one trump card left in my hand to play! I'm backin' it right up to the clean, cold limit! Son, you'll be trail-bossin' one of them herds for Concho John!"

The old man had forgotten a letter received at the Uvalde ranch till he pulled off coat and boots, ready to roll into blankets. He handed it across the fire to Breck. The gnarled handwriting was familiar as that shuck bed in the attic at home. The letter was written by Breck Lane's father.

Your mother kept up pretty well till after Christmas. Then New Year's she was expecting you. Seemed after that she somehow knew you wasn't coming. But she was mighty proud of the way Concho John had give you responsibility, and didn't want I should let you know she'd been taken down. She died last week, son.

The letter was already a month old. The fire blurred before Breck's eyes.

EARLY MARCH. Kimble County and the Llano Fork. Eleven hundred head held under herd, and the green grass sprouted now across the swales and level ground like a fresh glistening carpet. One of the men who had helped on the Nueces pushed a sweaty, dirt-stained horse into camp. Concho John wanted Breck Lane down in Uvalde County right away.

"What's wrong?"

The rider shrugged. "Old John didn't confide in me none. But from scraps of talk I hear, a man named Sid Payton has been biddin' for stock over Austin way. And Charlie Repstock is puttin' up two herds for him along the river. Old John never liked to have another drover beat him to a crossin'. It's that way, I guess."

Lane said, "You take charge here!"

It was ninety miles down to Long Rail. He caught up that same animal he had ridden from the yards last fall, a leggy bay with a tough stripe of black down backbone from withers to the root of his tail and a great willing heart. Just at sunup, another morning, he came down the sweep of the land.

"All right, all right," old Concho John's bellow rose from the yards. "You're supposed to be trailhands, ain't you? That's what I hired. Get another fire lighted. If you ain't got a spare iron for it, tell that blacksmith yonder to make one. Throw another chute in that back corral wall. Hell, yes, go out an' cut timber for it, if you have to!

"The idea is to roadbrand these cattle—not tomorrow! And tell that carpenter this chuck-box ain't right. By jumpin' juniper, any fool ought to know better. No, don't tell him, send him here! All right, all right—"

He spotted Breck riding through. Noise and confusion filled the yards, mounts, men, saddles, gear, wagons. A steady hammering came from the blacksmith shed. Corrals full of bawling cattle, milling herd held on the grass beyond, waiting to be pushed in. Old Concho John's voice rose above all this uproar.

"This way, Breck! I gotta change my shirt. Follow over to the house—I'll talk as we go. Tell that boy yonder to saddle me the best hoss he can lay his rope on. I'll be leavin' quick as I change my clothes. All right, all right."

The veranda of the old Long Rail house was stacked with provisions, flour by the hundred-weight, beans by the sack, cases of canned tomatoes, dried fruit for an occasional delicacy. As they crossed the sill, old John's voice lowered. He turned one long, hard searching glance into Breck Lane's gray eyes.

"The rest is up to you!" he said. "Get the lead herd of that Injun contract stock movin' out tomorrow. See the second trails it close as possible. I got you one trail boss, name of Bill Cully. You'll have to choose yourself another. Word come from Sharpe &

Reeves two days ago. The market's crazy wild. There's talk of quarantine along the Kansas line against Texas fever. Reeves is waitin' for me up at Dodge."

He pulled into a clean-washed shirt, tucking his full beard inside the neck and buttoning it down, put on a pair of store pants and coat.

"Payton has come south to Austin himself. Repstock is puttin' up two herds for him along the river. If there's any kind of a line quarantine, Payton knows an' plans to beat it. You see that these herds get the start on his, see that they take a lead an' hold it. Here's the bunch of your inspection papers, everything clean.

"As fast as rails can move me north and back again, I'll join you on the trail. Maybe out from Fort Worth, sure before you cross the Red. Son, you're right-hand man, segundo now for Concho John!"

Far off, as he crossed the roll of the country, Breck Lane saw Concho John pause against the skyline. He turned in the saddle for perhaps sixty seconds long and looked back on what the trail had built for him, then taken in a season—the Long Rail spread.

Breck knew, had he been right there beside him, that there would have been no expression on the old man's face. Knew, too, what was balling up unseen inside Concho John's throat at this last good-by, because he could feel the same in his own. All man, he thought—right down to the heel-caps of his boots!

Breck said, "You, Anastacio! Get a fresh horse and hit for the Colorado. I don't know quite where you will find Joe, but keep your eyes open for a yellow-haired girl. Tell Joe I got to have him. It don't matter if the corn patch is half plowed or not. Kimble County. No later than four days from now. He'll be trail boss for Concho John's second herd up trail from there. All right, all right! What's keepin' you?" He grinned.

CHAPTER IV

TONIA

HER eyes were deep and indefinable, except there was never any doubt about their color. They were blue. They held a man and made him wonder if the depths were more like deep sky after sundown or clear open water under the pouring light of noon, or sun-flecked ripples across some dark shaded pool. It was the way they changed.

"You—you're Concho John's daughter," Breck Lane said finally, without any doubt. "I remember once when he spoke of you."

She laughed a clear sparkling sound. "So he really spoke about me once? I didn't think he'd even thought about me since this time of spring last year—except for the letter he wrote for me to meet him here."

Breck Lane said, "Here? Here with the herd, you mean? No, ma'am, I ain't seen Concho John since the day he quit Uvalde County on his way north for Dodge."

"It was from Dodge he wrote me," she explained. "He said he hoped to meet the lead herd as it crossed the Brazos and trail north with the outfits from there. But if anything delayed him, I was to find his right-hand man, Breck Lane."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Lane," Breck said.

His gray eyes left the blue of hers and took in two brass-studded trunks, assorted hand luggage, a canvas bundle that looked like a small wall tent, what was plainly a woman's saddle and other odds and ends stacked and lashed in the rear of a buckboard. Beside her on the buckboard seat sat another girl, holding a green parasol against the midday heat, and a noncommittal youngster with downy cheeks was driving the team.

"You needn't look so worried," Concho John's daughter said. "I won't be nearly the trouble you think.

All this luggage isn't mine, only the trunks and three of the valises and the saddle and that box and—oh, yes, I'll want to keep the tent.

"You see, we've been camping here, Mary and her brother waiting with me. Then yesterday we met Mr. Repstock crossing with his herd, and one of his men told me you were coming about a day's drive back. Mary wants to get home tonight. So we'd best find the wagon now and get my things settled."

Breck Lane's eyes probed into the blue of hers again. "Did Concho say for you to do that?"

"Well—well, not exactly," she admitted. "But he isn't going to leave me here in Texas. Not in any young ladies' boarding school, this time! While he trails north to the Yellowstone or Montana and begins building a new ranch—no, he isn't! I'm going along with him!"

"Did Concho John say this was his last drive from Texas?"

"No. Well, not in so many words," she considered. "But he's seen the north country—the kind of country a cowman dreams about, he said, knee-deep in grass everywhere. There's new land there, free range. And he wrote he wasn't through and finished yet. Added up that way, two and two makes four. I know he's driving every head of Long Rail cattle, every horse and dogie from the Uvalde ranch."

"Yes, that's true," Breck Lane said. "Nearly four thousand head in the brand. Too many for a crew to handle, the old she-stuff and youngsters holdin' back the pace despite anything. But the two contract herds for Sharpe & Reeves crossed the Brazos ahead and over west, early yesterday. Barrin' accident, both will beat Repstock to the Red!"

"Oh, there's the wagon coming now!" she said. "Don't trouble to go back with us, Mr. Lane. I can tend to everything."

SHE smiled at him. The buckboard swung around on the sod and started off for the wagon, visible a a mile distant. He had some confused image of brown hair and blue deep eyes that laughed or all at once were somber, and left a man wondering afterward just what they were like without coming to any solution.

Breck Lane couldn't get the sight of her out of his mind all afternoon, and still he couldn't remember how she looked with any satisfaction. He was more than hoping Concho John had somehow caught up unseen during the afternoon, when he motioned his swing men to spread and bed the herd on dry ground for the night.

But she was standing in the glow of the cook's fire through the dusk as he rode in, bent over a dutch oven of brown biscuits. The early guard, grabbing food before taking charge of the herd, had paused long enough to pitch a small wall tent a little distance from the wagon.

"Shore, all thet's lackin' to make a camp like this-un same as home air a woman's touch," Grumpy Clark, the cook, was saying. "Ain't it a fact, boys?"

"Me, I never et sich delicious sody biscuit!" said a boy from the early guard. "Brown an' flaky, just like cake, it is. Somethin' about 'em is mighty different, Grumpy!"

She turned against the fire, and Breck Lane saw that he had been all wrong. Her eyes were deep as night itself, mirroring tiny dancing flames; the fire made roses in her cheeks.

For no reason he could name, Breck Lane thought of Joe, who had left a wife on the Colorado to drive a herd north for Concho John—"such a mighty pretty girl, with the softest yellow hair." This girl's head was brown, but he could understand just what Joe meant now. Her hair was soft and wavy, too. He had always liked brown hair.

She looked at him through the glow of the fire. "I forgot to tell you, my

name's Tonia. Or did John think to mention that?"

"No, he didn't tell me." Breck tasted the sound of the word on his own lips. "Tonia! It's a pretty name for a girl," he said.

"I guess you've never met many girls." She laughed.

"No. No, there never was much time," he reflected. "Down home, we had the colts to break and gentle. Then there was the regular ridin' work. I kept at it pretty steady, figurin' whatever I could learn would come in handy later on the trail. I always wanted to trail."

"I always knew more men than girls," she recollected. "That was before Concho John took to the trail. After Mother died, he didn't know what else to do with me, I guess; so it was one cow camp after another. But finally he had to send me off to school. I suspect he didn't like it much more than I did right then."

"Well, he'll be joinin' us any time. Sure, before we reach the Red," Breck said.

AT Red River Station a letter postmarked from Ogalalla, that north trail town springing into prominence on the Platte, was waiting from Concho John. They read it, sitting shoulder to shoulder, on the chuck-wagon box.

Get them two herds for Sharpe & Reeves Injun contracts up over the Chisholm trail and across the Kansas line, hard as you can prod them. Payton is back north somewhere around Wichita. Settlers up from Caldwell lost heavy last year from Texas fever ticks. Talk is that anyhow part of the Kansas line will be under quarantine against Texas herds after the first day of May.

Beat Repstock over the line with them two herds, no matter what the cost. Sharpe & Reeves will have a man down there on the lookout. Swing the Long Rail herd west when you reach Salt Fork, and line for Dodge with it. But anyhow, I'll meet you sure somewhere in The Nation.

Maybe you'll have already met my girl when you get this. She was staying with friends near the Brazos crossing. But I'm writing her a letter now, this same mail, saying she's to come north by rail in a month or six weeks and join us at Dodge with the Long Rail herd.

The girl at Breck Lane's side laughed. "A month or six weeks' time from now—well, I guess not!" she said. "Oh, I knew what was coming when he started driving Long Rail brand. He didn't fool me a little bit! The Long Rail outfit is moving north, lock, stock and barrel."

Breck Lane stared straight ahead. "It leaves us eighteen days," he counted up. "Eighteen days till the first of May!"

That same afternoon the Long Rail herd crossed the Red and bedded on the grass, six miles into The Nation. The crossing had been shallow, easy. And at sundown, looking back, they saw the tall dust signal of another herd reach south banks.

"That'll be Repstock, comin' yonder," Breck Lane said. "We passed him, drivin' late and early since the Brazos."

He paused to catch a fresh horse for saddle. Joe had put his herd through the Red late yesterday; and Bill Cully, the single trail boss Concho John had hired before leaving Uvalde County, had crossed earlier the same morning. Both were a snailing day's trail drive ahead.

Toward midnight, Lane raised sight of a light at Joe's wagon, the herd bedded just beyond. He was moving one trail herd of his own, too large and unwieldy of itself with Long Rail calves and she-stock, keeping close contact with two others on the side.

He was riding twenty hours a day in saddle, worn even leaner than he had been that winter; but bigger-boned somehow, wider through the shoulders, as though for all the hardship of it, the frame of him had filled out, even grown a bit. He would have weighed a hundred sixty, hardly more, every muscle of him hard as so much sinew.

"Bill Cully's a couple hours' ride uptrail," steady-going Joe told him,

roused from sleep. "We been holdin' close enough together to lend help, in case either of us has a bad run. But we been mighty lucky so far, seems like. Not even a day water-bound."

"There's still the Washita, both forks of the Canadian and the Cimarron waitin'," Breck Lane said. "Another thing which might mean worse —quarantine on the Kansas line. I heard from old John back yonder. He says to cross before the first day of May! Concho John lost thirty-two sections of land back in Uvalde County to put up these two herds for Sharpe & Reeves, to make good his word and promise. See that you don't lose a day, Joe. Get word ahead to Bill Cully."

He mounted again, swung back along the trail. There were times when he dozed asaddle, hands knotted tight around the horn before him. But a shift of pace, rough ground, or the animal changing course would always bring him wide awake in an instant. It was that way now. He checked the horse, one hand hard on reins, as the animal threw up its head to whinny. Breck sat there quiet, listening.

THE breeze quartered up from the south. From off in the night, his ears caught the small silvery tinkle of a bridle chain or spur. He heard an animal snort, a man's voice curse the beast with some low harsh word. Two or three ridden horses passed at a distance. There were all kinds of men riding this trail.

Early as it was in the year, at Red River Station he had learned that several trail herds had been ahead. A herd of two hundred yoke of prime broken oxen, bound for the Kansas granger market, waited on the Red, already hoofsore from travel. About to lift a hail, Lane rode on south, silent instead.

He paused for a word with the late guard at the herd, climbed down at the Long Rail wagon, pulled a blanket over him. He might have slept an hour. The first creeping line of gray was just visible over the east horizon; he heard a rider speak a word and move for his night horse. But it was not this that woke him—it was a vague, dull steady rumble that seemed to rise from the ground under his head. He sat up suddenly.

The rider paused, said, "Yeah, somebody's had a run! It's a long way off—but north, I reckon. Or else Repstock crossed last night and his herd's stampedin' this way. I listened long enough to know it's comin' nearer."

All hands fell to guard around the Long Rail herd, holding the beasts without difficulty till daylight. It was just past sunup that Joe pushed a spent dripping horse into the wagon camp.

"Maybe the boys got five hundred head held in one bunch over east from here. The rest are scattered clear back to the Red!" Joe paused, looking into Breck Lane's eyes a while. "I can't take oath to what did it," he said. "But one of the boys on guard swears it was two-three riders chargin' wild into the herd, rattlin' slickers and wavin' somethin' big an' white like a sheet between 'em. It don't take much to start jumpy cattle."

Lane said, "Take half my crew. Gather the best you can, Joe."

He found Tonia's blue eyes fixed on him from the wagon. At Red River Station, she had bought a pair of boots, a driver's jeans and shirt. The garb made her look small, slim, even more feminine by contrast. He remembered her standing there; but rode on past, south along the trail, without speaking.

Since that night in Sid Payton's layout at Ellsworth, months ago, Lane had not met Repstock face to face, although they had put up herds within two hard days' ride of each other. For a week they had trailed through northern Texas, occasionally sighted each other's dust. The crawling line of the herd was in motion now. Repstock rode out from the

point. The same flat-crowned ragged hat was cuffed back from bleached brows, the same angular frame in saddle, same expression and pale, hard eyes that Breck Lane knew so well.

"I can't prove you sent two-three men ahead uptrail and stampeded a herd last night," Breck said. His eyes never left Repstock's pale gaze. "But such a thing don't want to happen again. If it does, I'll come gunnin' you, Repstock! I mean it just like that. I'll come after you and kill you!"

HE swung his horse. Repstock had said no word. Lane rode back up the trail. The wagon had not moved, but half a crew of men left with the Long Rail herd were moving out, making what miles they could. Tonia still stood beside one of the big wagon wheels, small and fragile, somehow, in a man's rough garb; apparently she had not moved since Lane had quit the camp. Her eyes held a different expression from any that he had ever seen before.

But he offered no explanation; she had nothing to ask. "Seventeen days now," said Breck.

"I told Grumpy I could drive his wagon and start his fires," she said. "He'll make an extra hand in the saddle." Breck Lane never forgot that certain look in her eyes.

Another herd had crossed the Red that early morning, following Repstock's lead, in the same road brand. Both passed, snailing along northward in mile-long slow threads. It took all day to gather Joe's herd, scattered back to the Red, and the count before sundown showed more than forty head short. Word had been sent uptrail for Bill Cully to shove along on his own. Two men were left with the hope of finding the drifters and catching up.

But it did no good. They hit bitter falling weather; the Washita was up ahead. Bill Cully's herd grazed the near bank, waterbound since late the day before, while Repstock had crossed the last of his cattle not two hours ahead of the sudden rise of freshets, and moved north ahead. The Long Rail herd caught up.

"Cut forty head Long Rail into your herd, Joe," Breck said.

He caught out a big-barreled sorrel and pushed into the flood. Two hundred yards downstream, the animal caught solid footing and pulled out, disappearing up the bank. Lane came back with word the South Canadian was worse, Repstock held up there with both herds. The Washita had dropped eighteen inches on a stick stuck in the bank and less débris came on the muddy rushing flood.

"Send your remuda across first, Cully," Breck said. "We'll pour the cattle in behind. Get your swimming horses, men!"

Both Joe and Anastacio remembered the Red and the way a sandy-headed boy, just turned twenty-one that day, had refused to swim two hundred head of horses for fear one would drown. This was different; that other long ago, last fall. They lost fifteen head in the Washita. But before night fell, three herds had crossed.

Thirteen days. Twelve, till the first of May. They swam the South Canadian, half a dozen miles east of the position where Lane had last seen Repstock's held herds. Fifty head got caught, milling round and round in an eddy against cut banks. But the crew split it up. A horse went under in the suck of the pool and the rider saved himself, coming out dripping, half drowned, hanging to a steer's tail. They found his mount later, cut saddle loose. The North Canadian.

"No, the Cimarron was quiet when I crossed," said a drifter south along the trail. "But watch out for the quicksand. The Cimarron is always bad."

The weather had been awful. Up across The Nation, grass was hardly started. Beasts were gaunted, hoof-

sore. The tally showed more than a hundred lost since Texas. But Concho John had said to cross the Kansas line, no matter what the cost. Bill Cully was trailing nearly a day's drive ahead again, with Long Rail dragging twenty miles behind Joe's herd and dropping farther back all the time, trying to save new calves.

Breck Lane didn't know what had become of two heavy trunks, three valises, a box and other odds and ends stacked in the Long Rail wagon at the Brazos. Now every spare foot of that wagon bed was crowded with a load of new-born spring calves at the end of a day's drive. Breck rode forty miles from the head of the drive to the tail herd one night.

"Cully sank twenty head in the Cimarron and almost lost his wagon. But he crossed. Joe will be over this morning," he said. "I'm beginning to wonder—wonder what's happened to Concho John. He said he'd meet us here sure, somewhere along the trail. Without help from him, I'll have to cross the line with Cully's and Joe's herds, leaving Long Rail moving up the Salt Fork toward Dodge alone."

THE girl looked up, grinned at him, one cheek smudged with a streak of biscuit flour from the chuck-box where she worked, paler, small and slim in a man's trail clothes and a piece of apron. "There's Grumpy riding now," she said. "He makes a good extra hand. And I'm Concho John's own daughter."

"Yes," he said, looking down at her. Then he was silent for a long, long moment. "Yes," he repeated. "Here are the Long Rail inspection papers. Take the Salt Fork turn. I'll be back when I can."

"Breck!" The word caught at him as he turned away. It was not yet sun-up. The late guard was just shoving the Long Rail herd from the bed-ground, grazing out north. Hands were stretching a rope corral to hold the remuda coming in. A huge fire-scarred pot of coffee boiled over in the ash. "Breck, is there going to be trouble?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Cully's herd is leading Repstock by ten miles. Joe's holding his own. Steady driving, both will cross the Kansas line ahead of May."

"You're not answering my question."

"I don't know," he said. "But if it's coming, it will happen soon."

Billy Cully crossed the Salt Fork ahead. Ten miles from the Kansas line, he bedded the herd one dusk, an easy drive in prospect for the morrow and a day to spare, and Breck Lane rode back through the night to ride up with Joe. Midway across that open country between the two herds, his ears caught the first sound of guns. As he reined around, listening, the noise was a dull vibrant rumble that muttered ominously, all but faded out and then came stronger on the wind. Turned and headed back, he knew cattle were stampeding.

It was a black night of hell. Before dawn, a thin bone-chilling drizzle was falling. Dripping, mud-splashed, Breck Lane rode through it. There was no telling over how many miles of land Cully's lead herd was scattered. In the night Lane came on two of the crew, holding perhaps three hundred head against the banks of a coulee, and heard their story. A dozen or more men had ridden down on Cully's herd in the early night and started work with shotguns, rifles, short-arms, as the rush hit the cattle.

"Maybe Kansans from north of the line," the rider explained. "Some of them land-grubbers lost every head of milk cows an' work oxen last year from Texas fever. Others had crops trampled by herds. Fence was cut in some instances out of plain cussedness. These men last night might be enforcin' their own kind of line quarantine ahead of season."

"I don't think so," was all Breck said. "Get word to Joe. Tell Cully to do the best he can."

Dawn came through the chill falling mist, a sullen creeping gray. Breck was heading across toward the Kansas line. What he saw looked like a dark sodden hump of cloth—something dragged across the trail. His mount shied away. He was off in an instant then, bent over the other man.

"John— Concho— Concho John!" he said.

In the gray dismal light, it was hard to see. But Lane could feel the sticky warmth of blood spreading between the fingers of his hand holding the old man up. How long ago it had happened, he could not tell. But he knew Concho John had reached the end of his last long trail here, riding down from the Kansas line through this black dripping night to meet the herds. There was a charge of buekshot in his back. A knot like a fist rose up and jammed in Breck's throat.

"All right, all right! What's keepin' you?" he heard Concho John mutter. "What's the matter here? Get them cattle across the line to Sharpe & Reeves! You can hear me, can't you? Son, you got to carry on—carry on for Concho John! All right, all right!" His head slipped forward.

CHAPTER V

Trailman's Triggers

BRECK searched the ground, step by step. The gray morning light came stronger. Three or four hundred yards away, he found a saddled livery horse standing under the cut banks of a gully, reins tangled. Track showed how the animal had wandered up the gully, back again. There was blood on the saddle cantle. The misty drizzle fogged the sign, but not enough rain had fallen to wash out blood or hoof prints. Lane backtracked.

Up the trail a way, he came on sign of that other horse he sought. He circled here afoot. From the curled mat of prairie grass, his fingers extracted an empty buckshot shell that had been tossed from a barrel. Lane thrust it into his pocket. Deep-cut track showed where the livery horse Concho John was riding had jumped at the shot, breaking on at a run. Here a man's boot heel had been pressed in the sod. The other animal had cut off to the east.

"No chance—no chance at all," Breck said.

He had laid his slicker over Concho John's body, there beside the trail. His face was bleak, expressionless, except for the eyes, gray and stony-hard, set on the ground ahead. The drizzle struck under the brim of his hat, forming drops, little rivulets that ran and dripped from the knob of his chin.

It took him an hour to track out the first mile and a half. The horse he followed cut down flat banks, turned up the course of a tiny creek ahead, crossed a stretch of rocks. Another hour and that trail would have been washed out forever. Toward midmorning, the drizzle quit. Breck marked the spot.

Son, you got to carry on—carry on for Concho John!

He cut back to the south, riding hard. Bill Cully was a stocky, tightmouthed man. Guns had dropped or wounded more than eighty head of cattle; Cully had been unable yet to make any other count. But his men had been in saddle on waiting night horses within a minute after the rush and shooting hit the herd.

First of all, every trailhand knew his job was with the cattle; next he was a fighting man. At dawn when he had recaptured his remuda and made a change of horses, Cully had cattle scattered over ten miles of open country. Joe had heard the news and sent up four men. Since first gray daylight, Joe's herd had been creeping up from the rear.

"All right, throw together!" Breck Lane said. "That way, you can push six-eight armed men out ahead. Keep

drivin' till you cross the Kansas line. Don't stop for anything!"

Cully's crew had been a day and night in saddle, facing a second day now without rest. Cully listened, a grim set look tightening on his face. Breck drew him aside.

"Best not let your boys know the rest of it for a while if you can help it," Lane explained. "A lone rider did this other job, either meetin' Concho John by chance or followin' him down the trail last night. There wasn't anything else to do, I had to leave his body there covered over with a slicker.

"But, Cully, do you reckon Joe himself would take John's body back to meet the Long Rail herd on the Salt Fork? Joe bein' a married man now, might know better how to break the word to the girl followin' than any of us. I seen the Bible Joe's wife give him before he left, wrapped up careful in a little oilskin cover she'd made. Joe will want to take his Bible. Concho John would want to be buried along the main trail."

Cully nodded, his mouth a white-lipped slit. Cully had no word to say. Breck caught out a fresh horse from the remuda.

AT early afternoon, he took up the track again where he had marked and quit it. It was faster trailing now, hoofprints clean in the damp soil after the morning drizzle lifted. By this Breck was able to roughly guess the time of the shooting; the man had twelve or fourteen hours' lead on him. The track wove across the country, came back.

The man had waited around here two or three hours, Lane guessed. Finally the trail moved north, straight for the Kansas line. Breck trailed across into Kansas before dusk fell. Something glittered on the sod before him. He swung down, picked up a thrown hindshoe. It was nearly dark, too late to track out more. He turned back to meet the herds.

Son, you got to carry on—carry on for Concho John!

He stood in the rough board lobby of a Caldwell, Kansas, hotel early next morning, asking for the Sharpe & Reeves' representative staying here. Reeves himself, gray, lank, showing the weather-mark of years spent on trail, faced him. Reeves had come into town last night.

"Lane, eh? Breck Lane," Reeves said. "Yeah, Concho John has mentioned you to me."

"Both herds under contract to you crossed the line into Kansas just after daybreak this morning," Lane told him. "We had a bad run two nights ago. Cully, who's in charge, will have a crew back-trail gatherin' drift and stragglers as soon as his men get a few hours' rest. Cully will deliver to you tomorrow. Concho John won't be here himself."

Reeves looked at him searchingly. "John's been north above Ogalalla, searchin' for a new Long Rail range," Reeves said. "I don't know what success he's had. But I never knew Concho John to miss a delivery. Either his own or another man's. He's trailed contract cattle north as far as the Yellowstone for me. What's wrong?"

"Concho John has made his last delivery up this trail," Breck Lane said. "Some killer emptied a load of buckshot into his back night before last. I found him just at dawn."

On the street outside, Breck paused at the hitchrack, shoved one hand into saddle bag and took out a thrown hindshoe worn shiny-bright on one side from recent use. He crossed the street into the smoky interior of a blacksmith shop, dropped the shoe on an anvil. The smithy ran a smudged hand across his sweaty forehead, looking up.

"I'm wonderin' if you didn't make an off hindshoe like this for a rider late yesterday sometime, maybe early this mornin'?" Breck asked. "Narrow-toed, a little crooked in the shank. I wanted to ask."

The smithy shook his head. "No, I was resettin' iron on a six-yoke freighter. Workin' half the night by lantern light. But you might ask Jake Thomas up the street."

Up the street, Jake Thomas took a nubbin of black plug from his pocket, shaved off shreds with the blade of a shoeing knife, jammed the bowl of his pipe chock-full. He took a slow deliberate puff.

"Yeah. Big red roan with a blaze face," he said. "Don't recall the rider's name, if he told me. But I recollect he headed off down-trail. That was dusk, last night."

Breck turned, rode off south, down the trail. Both of Repstock's herds had crossed the line without incident early yesterday, he knew. High dull gray clouds covered the morning, threatening rain; the wind had a raw edge to it. Once he paused, dismounted, and again took that off hindshoe from saddle bag. He fitted it over a hoofprint left in the damp trail soil. He nodded silently, rode on.

THE man he followed had traveled two, perhaps three hours through the night past. Breck found where he had halted then, tied his beast and kindled a tiny sheltered fire. From the trample the roan had made, fretting at a tie-rope, Breck judged several more hours had been spent here. Finally four other riders had come across from the trail, joined the man. There had been a while of parley, scattered cigarette butts lay in the grass.

The five had gone off east. Their track crossed ahead and was trampled out under the broad hoof-cut swath of Cully's driven cattle. For a while the five had dogged the flanks of the drive, their presence unknown, unseen in the night. Breck searched an hour, tracking out sign through this trampled maze.

The five bore south again. It was two hours later that Breck found a wide, plain trail to follow. The five, scouring down the country sometime after dawn, had picked up between forty and fifty head of stampede drift and stragglers lost from the night drive. They were working hard, crowding the beasts straight south now, to put distance behind before another dusk. But now only four riders harried the stock along. The fifth man had cut off again to the west.

Breck followed him. Track crossed and swung down the main trail at a steady jog. Three drovers, moving a small band of heavy horses and mules

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north for the Kansas farm market, hailed in sight. Breck tore a sheet from a tally book, addressed a few lines to Bill Cully, which the three could deliver for him.

"I'm lookin' for a rider two-three hours ahead downtrail," Breck said. "I reckon you must have passed him."

"Yeah." One of the drovers spat. "Up this way from the Salt Fork crossin'. Ridin' a blaze-face roan, I remember. He inquired what we knew about the Salt Fork cut-off up to Dodge and left trail there. You'll mark the spot by a bald-top knoll."

"Thanks," Breck said.

The track was the same, plain, where the man had angled off, aiming for some tributary point north of the main Salt Fork now, Breck guessed. Down on an eminence of the Salt Fork's banks stood a rude cross and the fresh-covered mound of a grave, circled by track of the wagon Joe had sadly driven south to meet the Long Rail herd yesterday.

But the man Breck followed had cut across north of this. He was trailing close, not more than an hour, an hour and a half behind, when dusk fell and blotted out the track. All day the sky had been threatening. It began to rain.

He rode through black, dripping night, too close now to give up, but wandering hopelessly. The man hadn't been six miles ahead at dusk. Another dawn, rainfall like this would have washed out all last trace of track, if the other kept traveling. It was Breck's third night asaddle His nostrils caught some vague foreign odor on the night. He halted, swing in the saddle, drew a long quick breath of it—and knew he smelled the thin pungency of wood smoke!

He began riding upwind against the pelting drizzle of the storm. He wove off left, then right. A mile. He reined around, pushed back. Open ground fell into a swale ahead. He stopped. His mount pulled at the reins; he gave the beast its head. The smell of smoke came suddenly, overpoweringly strong. Not fifty paces off, a crack of light showed out.

He had ridden through that close to some dugout set against the shallow slope. Dimly Breck could make out the lines of a pole corral, just ahead. His mount kept tugging at the bit. A horse stamped in the corral. Breck tried to turn and retreat before corraled animals winded his own mount. Then a horse whinnied loud.

SID PAYTON swung around from the rusted dugout stove. For thirty seconds his hard straight glance bored at Repstock through the light of a candle set in the neck of a bottle on a sagged table in the room. Payton's right hand came up slowly, stopped elbow high, just free of the open flaps of his coat. Payton carried two derringers in special-made armpit holsters under his coat.

Repstock said, "What made that horse whistle?"

Repstock had turned where he sat on an upturned box beside the table, staring at the rough plank door of the dugout dragged shut against the night. Payton watched him motionless, noticing the taut strained look suddenly on Repstock's face, one bony-knuckled hand rigid on the table. Repstock's hand took hold of the table's edge; he started to get up. The sound of Payton's voice stopepd him.

"Charlie, it wouldn't be in your mind to double-cross me, would it?" Payton asked. The words sounded softly casual. "No, it wouldn't even have occurred to you that I generally carry a considerable roll of money on me, would it? But since you sent word for me to meet you down here for the payoff, that thought has been in my own mind. It would be a large mistake, Charlie!"

Repstock whirled. He turned stiff as metal at what he saw in Payton. The gambler's eyes watched him with a steady, deadly waiting look.

Repstock started to speak, choked

on the words: "Lissen, Sid! Don't get me wrong—"

"If I'm wrong no harm is done," Payton said in the same soft casual voice. "If on the other hand, you've planned to have a friend or two stoppin' by tonight, just droppin' in real sociable-like, to help you with a little killing, it's probably the last mistake you'll ever make, Charlie. Things haven't gone so good. Sure, I know the job you did with your crew two nights ago. I hear there was another little stampede down the line, after crossin' the Red.

"Out of that run you picked up thirty-forty head that you drove along with my cattle and tried to sell across the Kansas line late yesterday. I figured maybe one of the reasons you wanted me to meet you down here for the payoff was some similar petty rustlin' job that you had planned would take most of your day."

Repstock wet dry lips with the tip of his tongue. Payton watched him with the same fixed steady look.

"Several things might make a corraled horse whinny like that. Natural things," Payton said. "Might be loose range stock in the neighborhood. If the other's wrong, what are you so almighty scared of, Charlie?"

Repstock was holding tight to the table edge. "Lissen! I'm clearin' country! Gettin' out of here!" he said. "There's somethin' you don't know about. Two nights ago after we'd finished that stampede and shootin', I was headed back uptrail alone. A rider crowded me. Too dark to see much of anything—except the white of his beard blowed out in the wind, the big frame of him asaddle. I was carryin' that sawed-off shotgun. I let him have a load of buckshot in the back!"

His voice was a husky half-whisper. "It was Concho John! I'm gettin' out of here, quittin' this country, I tell you. I want my money—here! Right now!"

PAYTON watched him for a while, his face like something cut out of stone. The gambler shook his head imperceptibly. His eyes didn't move. His left hand moved inside his coat carefully, brought out a fat roll of bills. Repstock's eyes changed. In the dull candlelight, the pupils looked tiny, suddenly bright and intense.

Payton said, "Nine hundred will square us. When I hired you last fall, Repstock, it was a rat's job that I wanted done. But I didn't know how much of a rat I'd hired till now!"

His fingers counted off the notes, folded them, tossed the wad down on table toward Repstock, something bitter and mocking in his expression now. His attention never left Repstock. The only sound was the drip from the sod roof, splashing from the shallow overhang across the door. The horse at the corral had whistled only once. Repstock bent forward, hunkered over the table from the box where he sat. He looked up at Payton once more.

His voice was throaty, thick. "You shorted me a hundred!"

His right hand was feeling down toward the dirt floor behind. Taut, white-knuckled fingers contracted about the grip on an eighteen-inch sawed-off shotgun left there with a saddle and gear brought in out of the rain. Repstock leveled the weapon up under the table. He was still shuffling the bills before him with his left hand. Payton could not see the weapon, but he saw the change, read what was on Repstock's face. Payton had lived close to violence all his life.

He started to say, "I didn't think you'd have the nerve to try it single-handed. You cowardly—" His long deft hands drove inside coat fronts for the two hand-fashioned precision derringers carried in armpit holsters. The right barrel of the sawed-off shotgun exploded with deafening impact within the walls of this tiny

earth and sod-walled shack. The charge of buckshot, centered up, caught Payton squarely just below the breast-bone.

Repstock was bent over the man, feeling for that thick roll of bills inside Payton's coat, the shotgun still in his right hand, when a voice whipped at him from the door. Lane stood there.

He said, "Repstock, I've come after you to kill you!"

Repstock stared at him blankly. Draft from the open door flickered the candle flame on the table. This was the sandy youngster he had whipped and driven up the trail last year. Lane's words had sounded flat, toneless; a man would have spoken in that way to another rider about a rattlesnake beside the trail, "Best get off an' kill it!" Repstock was still holding the shotgun in his right hand. Only one barrel of the vicious sawed-off weapon had been discharged. He had an equal chance.

The sound from the door was the hard, sharper crack of a Colt .45—trailman's gun. The second barrel of the shotgun, fraction-second late, exploded into the dugout ceiling.

Lane stood there in the door a while. He recognized Sid Payton's features, head sagged over on the dirt floor. He went no farther into the dugout room. Repstock was dead. He felt sick now. He turned and sought the black bitter night outside at a stumbling half-run. But he remembered to throw corral gates open and free the two horses within so they would not starve. Once he had seen a rider trampled under hoofs, dead, and never forgotten. Now he had had to kill a man.

Son, you got to carry on—carry on for Concho John!

DAWN rose behind a wind that had cleared the heavens—a misty indefinable color that changed the dark of the night into clear morning blue. Like a girl's eyes. There was no dust this morning up the Salt Fork cut-off trail west to Dodge.

The herd had been drifted out at daybreak from bedground, a mile-long string of cattle, grazing as they moved. It was always like this after the clearing of a storm. The cattle felt the morning, moving briskly; calves born on trail gamboled, looking fresh-washed. This was the Long Rail herd from Texas, breeder cattle, stock to start a new ranch.

Breck rode up to the wagon just after sunup. Tonia had been bent over the coals of a breakfast fire, washing a great pan of tinware dishes while the water grew steaming hot. Her arms hung limp from the shoulders; her hands stopped still. She looked across the pan at Breck, her head uplifted, her lips parted a little. For a moment long she did not move or speak. Her eyes were questioning his with a mute, deep scrutiny that he had to answer. He nodded once, looking away.

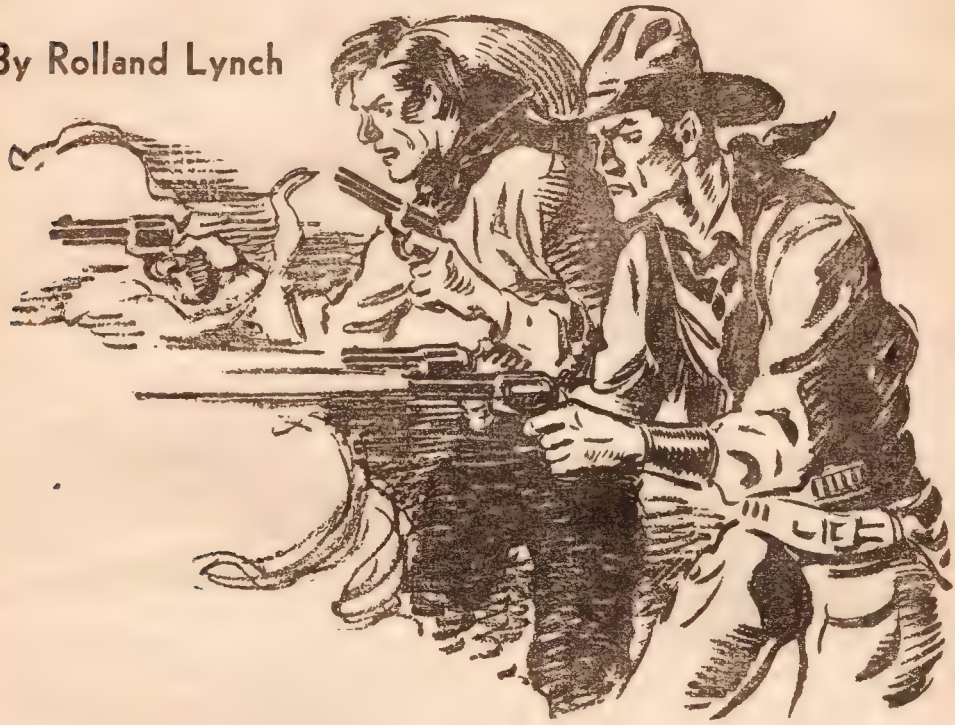
She rose and came across to him. Breck didn't know how it happened; her small wet hands reached up and took hold of his shoulders. She said, "Forget now, Breck. We met a man down from Dodge yesterday. The line will be open west. He's drumming up trade. More buyers collecting at Dodge this spring than any of the trail towns, he said. The market will be wide open."

His own arms had lifted and were about her. Suddenly he held her close, still not understanding how it had happened, crushing her close. Her eyes smiled up steadily into his.

"But we're not selling Long Rail, Breck. There's deep-grass country north, miles of it, free land. The kind of range a cowman dreams about," she said. "We're not through yet; there's still another card left to play. We're heading the herd on north past Dodge into that other country, to find Long Rail the home range my father wanted. You and me, Breck. I think that's what Concho John would have wanted."

The Washoe Killer

By Rolland Lynch



The wiliest gunman in the Washoes gets his come-uppance from a youngster who uses the killer's own .45 formula.

MORG MANGRUM laughed at the pick-calloused hands and shovel-stooped shoulders of the Virginia City miners. Digging holes in the ground and following will-o'-the-wisps ore streaks was the hard way to affluence and money. It was cleaner and less toilsome to use pistol barrels to dig the riches from dead men's pockets. And he had a sure-fire thing here. Johnny Beeman was the luckiest prospector in the Washoe country. Johnny would strike it rich. Then he would return to the girl who had snubbed Morg for him. Johnny would return all right—dead. And whatever his find was would line Morg's pockets.

Mangrum defied the frontier adage that to live by guns was to die by them. He was smug in the belief that all men were fools and acted as such. He knew their weaknesses and preyed upon them. He had a formula—goad the victim to berserkian rage and they were suckers for a man who could keep his head. He had the faculty to goad men—a caustic tongue. And his bland plea was therefore self-defense.

This day Black Moffet sought Morg in the Two Strike Saloon. Moffet had been staked out to bring the news of

a Beeman strike. Morg could tell by the excitement in Moffet's eyes that it had been made. Mangrum's dark orbs fastened on the burly miner with hypnotic intensity and he said:

"Well?"

Moffet could have broken the killer's neck with his blunt and calloused hands, but he showed his patent fear of Morg's reputation by sidling to the table and taking a chair.

With the virus of his news edging his voice, he said: "They did it! A vein ten miles long an' a mile wide."

Morg's eyes did not leave his target as his hands slid onto his lap beneath the card table.

"They?" he murmured quizzically.

"Beeman's picked hisself a pardner," answered Moffet. "Some younker from Kaintucky. They made the strike together. 'Tain't gonna be so easy now, Morg. This new button's a cool one."

"What's his name?"

"Calls himself Kip Tucker."

Morg's face drained of all color. The fury raging in his eyes frightened Moffet.

"What the hell, Morg?" he asked.

After a long moment's silence, the killer murmured savagely: "Tucker was the name of the girl Johnny married. This must be her brother. Good!" His eyes dulled with hateful reminiscence. Drawing smiles from women had been as easy as drawing his guns. But Betty Tucker hadn't smiled. She had seen through his suave veneer and pegged him for what he was. It roiled Morg's vanity every time he thought of it. But he would humble her.

Now Moffet's voice struck through his haze. "We'll be big men, Morg."

Mangrum's eyes slammed into focus. "Big men, Moffet?" he echoed. "You couldn't stand bein' big."

The import of those words was not lost on the miner. Fear became a startling thing on his face. "Don't look at me thataway, Morg," he whined. "Ain't you got no honor?"

Morg grinned tauntingly and said: "There ain't none such between men like us."

"You can't do it!" cried Moffet hoarsely. "Yuh promised me a share fer spottin'!"

"I've waited a long time to enjoy this *alone*," said Morg softly.

Moffet surged shakily to his feet. "You wouldn't kill me, Mangrum!" he croaked.

"I don't need you now," stated the killer.

Black Moffet cursed luridly and his lips drew flat. He hadn't reckoned on the cold-blooded nature of this man. Damning himself for a fool, his hands swooped for his pistols in an effort to surprise. But he knew that even in the motion, he erred.

Mangrum's sleeve hideout had slid into his palm moments ago and had been trained on Moffet from under the table. And now it spoke, the gray smoke drifting lazily up from about the edges of the baize. Moffet swayed uncertainly on his feet, thumbs crooked over the hammers. But his fear-driven gesture was destined to defeat. He sagged forward onto the table top, his glazing eyes but a foot from Morg's.

Through bubbles of blood, he croaked: "Damn you, Mangrum! Killers get killed. I'll see yuh in hell—"

He died draped grotesquely across the table.

Untouched by the savagery he had perpetrated, Morg rose and turned to the buggy-eyed barkeep and few patrons.

"How was it, Whisky?" he asked threateningly.

"Self-defense, Mister Mangrum," answered the menial hastily. "I saw him go for his irons and you didn't even move."

A vain smirk drew Morg's lips apart. "Yo're the smartest barkeep in Virginia City," he complimented smugly. "Pour 'em out on me." Then he reloaded his piece and strode from the saloon.

OUTSIDE in the sun's glare, Morg batted the shadows from his eyes and surveyed the boisterous town. Sweating, cursing bull-whackers toiled up the steep main street paralleling Comstock Ledge. Grimy men with picks and shovels and pans surged toward baked and drab Sun Mountain with hopes of finding Eldorado. Morg smiled. Fools! His Eldorado had come to him—riches and vengeance. There wasn't one blister on his hands. Not one speck of blue mud on his immaculate broadcloth suit.

Across the street Adolph Sutro harangued a group about his plans of harnessing the Carson River for the electricity to run stamp and lumber mills. Sandy Bowers, bonanza king, bellowed drunkenly from the swing doors of the Fashion House for all to come and have a drink. Fools! Dreamers! Crazy, all of them. A faint smile touched Morg's predatory lips. He'd get what he was after, then he'd get out. He'd go to Frisco. They could have this filth and holes and dreams. Betty Tucker could have the corpses.

He swung onto the boardwalk and headed for the corral. Townspeople and miners gave him a wide berth, which stamped a smug smile of importance on his lips. He was pistol king of this hell-roarin' town—and would leave it a money king.

Now he flattened against the wall of the mercantile as two figures came down the hill. His smile deepened. He wouldn't have to thread his way through the activity of Sun Mountain. Johnny Beeman and Kip Tucker were bringing the riches to him. Johnny was in the lead, with the tall and angular Tucker behind. Their saddle bags bulged. As the two miners turned into the corral, Morg shoved his thumbs in checkered vest pockets and waited.

When the two partners returned to the street, Morg cut across the ruts to meet them. His smile was expansive when he brought up in front of Beeman.

"Howdy, Johnny," he said affably. "Didn't expect tuh find you here. Fresh in from the diggin's, eh?"

Johnny Beeman wrinkled kindly blue eyes and answered: "Yeah, Morg. Surprised tuh see you."

Kip Tucker said nothing. He just looked, his homely face sober. He showed no signs of friendliness, and he had a disconcerting way of staring clear through a man. Morg felt uncomfortable.

"Gonna give the gals a whirl?" asked the killer hollowly. He couldn't keep his eyes fastened on the youngster.

Now the boy from Kentucky spoke. "No!" he said flatly. "Johnny's married. We'd go stony broke whirlin' around. We've got tuh send some money away to his wife in Montana. Come on, Johnny."

"Stage's left," said Morg hastily. "You're a little late. It'll be safest leavin' yore diggin's at the Two Strike tonight. Good iron box there."

"Morg's right," said Beeman. "Him an' me are ol' friends—both courted yore sister, Kip. No hard feelin's, eh Morg?"

"None a-tall," answered the killer with an effort.

"We'll go to the bank," stated Kip emphatically.

"Bank's closed," said Morg.

"What the hell, Kip?" swore Johnny. "Don't you trust nothin' ner nobody?"

The youngster answered stoically: "No! Nothin' ner nobody. I've even caught you holdin' out on me. An' I know how you are around likker. I'm thinkin' of the promise I made tuh my sister. I'm sendin' yuh back to her whole hide."

Morg watched the fleeting look of annoyance cross Johnny's face. He could have laughed then. Things were working out. Plans were taking definite shape in his mind. This would be easier than even Moffet said. This Kentucky youngster was a cool one, but he was a fool like the rest.

"Ain't no use lollygaggin'," said Mangrum suavely. "I aim to be friendly. Come on down to the Two Strike an' look 'er over."

At a nod from Beeman, Kip shuffled along behind the two as Morg led the way. The killer could feel the impact of the young miner's eyes upon his back. It gave him a clammy feeling he could not lose. But he was smug in the belief that when the sign was right his holstered guns would triumph. No one had ever penetrated his armor; no one had ever resisted his formula—no one ever would. They were all fools—like Black Moffet.

NOW they turned into the Two Strike. Sunlight still held sway on the street and the saloon was deserted awaiting the night's play. They bellied to the bar. Morg smiled with satisfaction when he saw the new covering on yonder table. All traces of Moffet's death had been wiped away but the fresh mound in boot hill. And time would level that.

Kip and Johnny hoisted their saddle bags to the mahogany. The barkeep shuffled up.

Morg said: "Friends uh mine from the hills, Whisky! Stow away this diggin' fer us until tomorrow."

Kip leaned over and spoke past Johnny. "I'd take it right kindly, Morg," he said flatly, "iff'n you don't stretch yore friendship too far. I'm choosy thataway!"

A tremor of anger shot through Morg and he half turned. Then he was smiling. The sign wasn't right. One at a time. His plans were definite now.

"Johnny," he said, grinning, "you must uh been feedin' yore pardner on barb wire an' cactus. He's folksy as a wounded grizzly."

The sickly sweet smell of liquor was beginning to sway Johnny Beeman now. "Don't mind him, Morg," he said. "Let's have a drink."

"Hold on!" said Kip sharply. He dug inside one saddle bag and brought out a small amount of dust. He handed it to Johnny, then strapped the bag up and pushed both of them toward the barkeep. "Put this away," he ordered. "An' don't take 'em out until tomorrow. My pard's got enough to pay his way. Don't give him more, no matter what!"

Johnny turned with pained expression. "Just one little fling," he pleaded.

"Not till after we've done what we've planned," Kip shot back. "We've got plenty tuh buy them Wind River cattle and drive 'em north. Plenty tuh pay off the ranch with. When that's done, I'll buy yuh a barrel uh busthead an' let you pry the lid off hell. Right now I gotta round up men fer a start in the mornin'. There's plenty of punchers here that ain't mined nothin' but bunions an' will be willin' tuh make the cattle drive. You wet yore whistle an' meet me at the restraw fer eats. If I find you've welshed dust on me, I'll break yore brittle neck!"

Morg was grinning inwardly now as Kip turned and strode from the saloon. The play couldn't be more perfect. And the stakes were bigger. Cattle, ranch—and Betty Tucker. Morg toyed with the idea of returning and taking some of the spirit out of her haughty bearing. He liked that thought. He edged close to Johnny and raised his glass.

"Here's tuh mossy horns and loose ropes," he winked.

"No droughts ner blizzards," gave back Johnny and downed the fiery liquor. "Drink up, Morg. I'm smarter than that Kip hellion thinks or gives me credit for. I'm gonna bust wide open."

"I wouldn't, Johnny," warned Morg. "That Kaintuck brother-in-law shore does wet-nurse yuh around. 'Tain't becomin' to see a growed man takin' orders from a younker."

Johnny tipped the bar bottle and let the stuff gurgle down his throat. And with the reddening flush of liquor creeping into his fair face anger turned his lips. Morg grinned.

"Don't say nothin' about my kin!" swore Johnny. "He's lookin' after me."

"He's shore wider across the britches than you," goaded Morg. "Hell! I'd as leave let a Mex tell me what I could an' couldn't do."

Johnny's eyes slitted drunkenly. Due to his long and hard work in the hills the liquor was attacking quickly. "He's the best damn pardner man ever had!" he shouted hotly. "Yo're sore at him because he's the brother of the gal that turned yuh down!"

"He's a damn hill-billy!" swore Morg to drive the last shaft. "An' she's a hell-kitty!"

"Damn yore insultin' tongue!" cursed Johnny and fumbled at his guns.

Morg was grinning as his pistol spouted flame. Seconds before he had uttered the words he knew would drive Johnny to his guns, he had slipped his sleeve hideout into his palm. The hammer was back and Johnny's weapons didn't even clear leather before it thundered.

A look of pained surprise swept over the miner's features and he clutched at his stomach. Saggingly, he turned and stumbled toward the front door. He crashed through the batwings with a lunge. His legs could be seen sticking up over the boardwalk as he lay with his head in the dust of the street.

Morg turned to the white-faced bartender. But before he could utter a word, the menial said: "He hollered he was gonna kill yuh. I heard 'im!"

Morg smirked. "No need for the mop, Whisky. He didn't leave a sign." Then he turned from the bar. He took the bottle with him to the same rear table where Black Moffet had found him. He sat down facing the door. One hand was below the edge, his derringer in the folds of his broadcloth coat, ready for instant use. Any moment now, Kip Tucker would burst through the doors—and Morg Mangrum would be a rich man. With eyes unblinking, he kept staring at the batwings.

MINUTES dragged on and became an hour. Johnny had been dragged away. Morg reached for the cards with one hand. His fingers trembled slightly. He swore softly to himself. Why didn't Kip come? Why didn't the young hellion dash wild-eyed into the saloon and demand the life of the man who killed his partner? Wasn't the youngster human?

Morg started with each form that came through the doors. But not one of them was the man whom he expected. Gradually cigarette smoke and the smell of liquor heightened. The buzz of conviviality set up amid the clink of glasses and chips. Impassive-faced gamblers took their places and peered slit-eyed at the players from beneath tilted hats. Morg took a long pull at the bottle. The palm holding the derringer began to sweat.

The liquor and delay built rage within him. He began to conjure up some kind of trick. He visualized the possibilities of Kip Tucker spotting his position against the wall and firing through it from the outside with a high-powered rifle. He wondered if the stoic Kentuckian was fanning the town flames against him. Deviling pictures made chaos in his mind. His eyes burned with intense concentration on the swinging doors.

Then something happened.

Five gun-hung punchers came into the saloon. For a long moment, they stood on the threshold and stared at the lone killer. Then they spread among the patrons and spoke sharp and low words to them. Morg's nerves jangled.

Players rose from their tables and took positions against the walls and bar. The punchers shoved back the tables to clear a lane. Then the chairs were stacked atop the tables and a path fifteen feet wide led directly to Morg's table. The killer was the cynosure of all eyes.

Morg swore through compressed lips. Every eye in the saloon was upon him, rendering his sleeve hideout under the table useless. Inwardly, he be-

came a thunderbolt of anger. The grim-lipped Kentuckian was baring his cold soul for all to see. By this strategy he was gaining himself an even break with a man who had always held the odds. Morg knew the youngster was just outside laughing at him in his silent and expressionless way. The killer's vanity was roiled. He was being made a fool!

Now Kip's slatlike body filled the portal. Gunless, he stood there looking across the smoke-filled room at Morg. Something in the youngster's eyes made Morg cold inside and for the first time in his life he felt the upper hand gone from his grasp. Kip advanced slowly toward him. The gun-hung punchers had taken up vantage points about the room.

When the youngster reached the center of the saloon, he stopped. His slitted eyes seemed hypnotic and held Morg as if in a vise. His voice sailed low and even through the hush:

"You all shot my pardner, suh. I've chosen this place as the field uh honor."

Anger threatened to twitch Morg's trigger finger. But he didn't dare. He couldn't get away with cold blood with every eye on him. By what right did this dirt-digging button have to choose anything? He had addressed Morg as if he were dirt under his feet; he had flaunted the killer's reputation.

Morg surged to his feet, his voice a snarl: "I killed 'im in self-defense. Somebody give the whelp a cutter! He's askin' for it! This's his own risk."

"No risk," goaded Kip. "I aim to see you dead an' this town rid of you."

The positive assurance of the youngster whipped frenzy through Morg. "Give 'im a gun!" he screamed.

"Just a minute," said Kip coldly. "From where I come, a debt uh honor is paid by duel. Yore weapons at ten paces, back to back an' fire on call. I hope you all will accommodate me."

Morg's face writhed with fury. He was unaware in this moment, that Kip Tucker was saying things to drive him berserk; using the same formula that had carried Morg to his reputation. All the cool calculation was gone from the killer. His nerves were raw and muscles taut from the strain of this wait. He wanted to empty his gun in the youngster, cursing as he did so, but the tense attitude of the crowd forbade that.

And now because of his hesitancy in accepting Tucker's offer, knowing smiles etched the lips of the onlookers. They had seen many gunmen quail before a cool youngster who was unafraid. Someone snickered. That touched off a new spark of anger within Morg. He surged to his feet.

"Ten paces!" he cracked out savagely. "Turn an' fire on call!"

One of the punchers passed Kip a gun and the youngster indolently turned his back on the killer and waited.

Slowly, Morg took his position. He drew his right gun and let it dangle in his hand. From the tail of his eyes he saw Kip's weapon. It was swinging easily and relaxed. He was as cool as Moffet had said.

At "One!" Morg stepped forward, his outthrust chin held high. Then suddenly his back crawled from belt to neck. He was alone in this crowd and they were hostile to his kind. Nothing had been said whether or not Kip Tucker would shoot square. What if the youngster turned and fired ahead of time? The joke would be on Morg.

"Two!" And the killer shook nervously. Rage, because of being made a spectacle, ate at his mind and upset its balance. A youngster was making a fool of the wiliest gunman in the Washoes. Sane reasoning fled. Life suddenly became a thing he would give anything to have. He had to get out of this! Whirl and fire! Run the gauntlet of hate to the back door and lunge into the night!

At "Three!" he whirled snarlingly. His gun came up and targeted the youngster's broad back. He couldn't

miss. Morg's finger tugged at the trigger.

Before his gun could speak, his body was whipped by hot and stinging blows. He reeled backward, the sounds of roaring guns in his ears. He tried to make his muscles obey, but they were like water. An awful numbness followed hammer strokes of pain. He couldn't stand! The filthy floor rose drunkenly up at him, but he was not aware of the impact as he sprawled upon it. He was staring with glazing eyes at the five punchers who had unloaded the salvo of lead into his body. Strangely, he was wishing he had taken a pick and moiled like the rest. He might have been rich—instead of victim of his own formula. His own treachery had cost him his life. His anger had flamed beyond reason.

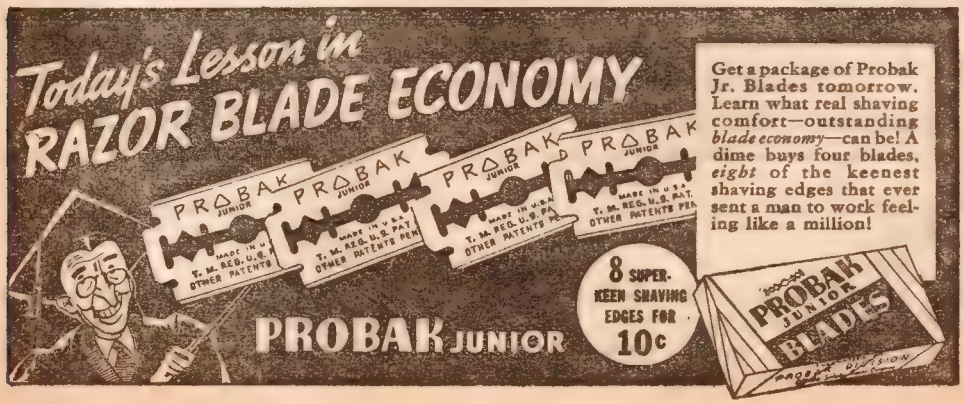
Whipped by the pain in his vitals, his body jerked spasmodically. The last thing he saw was the reeling form of Johnny Beeman barging into the saloon. He died with utter wonderment on his face. . . .

Johnny threw his arms about his partner and shouted: "Yuh damn fool, you shouldn't cross guns with him!"

Kip grinned one of his rare grins. "Guess I took a chance," he said evenly, "seein' as how I ain't no hand with a gun. But I expected him tuh do what he did. The boys I hired was watchin'. Killers never give breaks—not even to the last. Goad a man far enough an' he goes crazy tuh kill. Morg wasn't smart. He let his temper run away with his caution."

Then the youngster gripped Johnny's arm and there was reproach in his eyes. "Pardner, yuh welshed on me—held out dust in a money belt. I want you should hang that danged gadget up as token of yore life. Morg tunneled it square an' made yuh lose yore likker. What'll these new fightin' hands think about a pardner that'd welsh on a man. But what the hell? Belly up, boys! On me!"

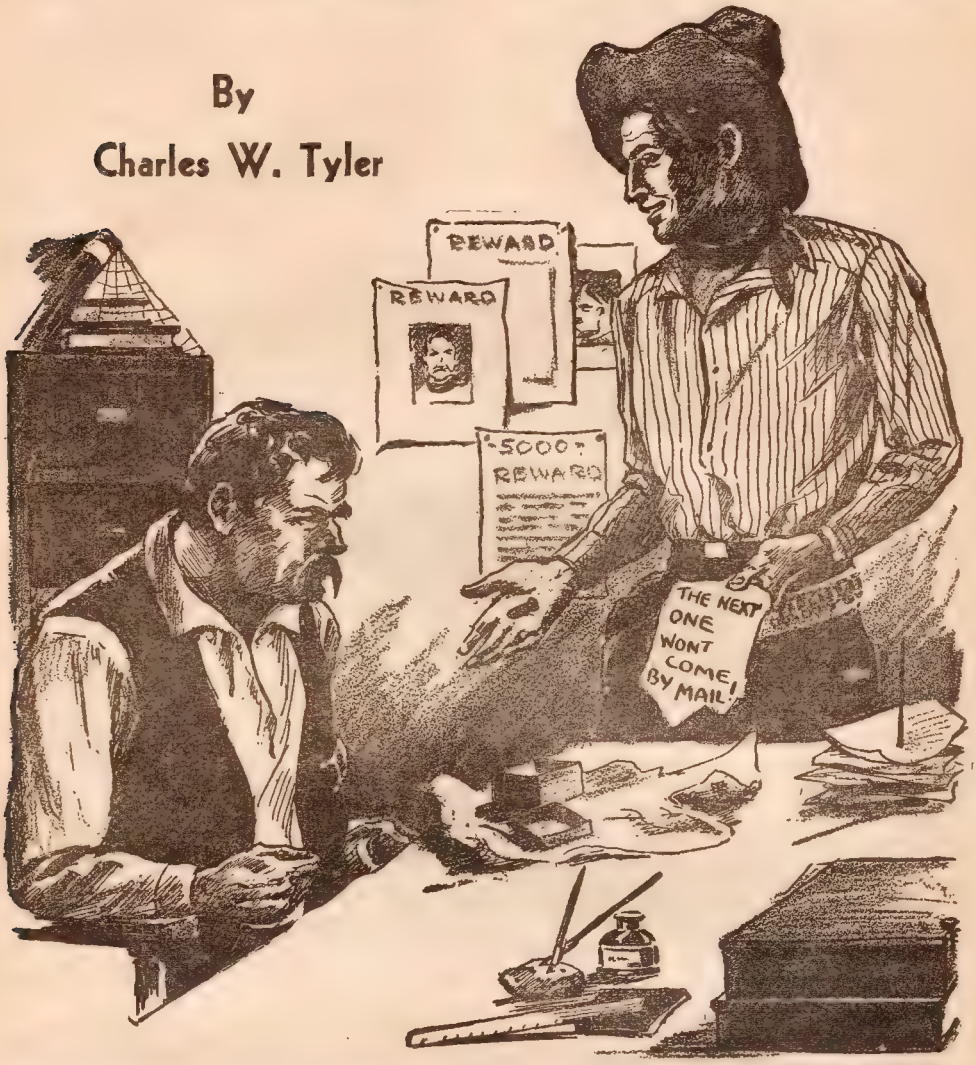
Johnny's eyes grew round as Kip pulled a heavy poke from his pocket and slammed it on the bar. But Johnny was too discreet at this moment to challenge it.



A Message from Mescal

By

Charles W. Tyler



Dona Ana was the home range of Deputy Johnny Bates. But when he left his own bailiwick to match gun magic down Mescal way, it looked as if his next address would be "General Delivery, Hell."

"MAIL for you, Johnny," said Sheriff Mel Claggett.

He jerked his grizzled head toward a package after a first brief exchange of amenities.

It was a very small package, and the pencil-scrawled address read:

JOHNNY BATES,
SHERIFF'S OFFICE,
DONA ANA.

The young deputy picked up the package, turned it over, squeezed it. Holding it beside his ear, he gave it a little shake.

"Might be suthin' in appreciation of services rendered," said the sheriff.

"Think so?" said Johnny.

He loosened the wrapping and lifted off the cover of a little pasteboard box. A forty-five caliber bullet nestled on a bed of cotton. A few words had been scribbled on a torn bit of paper. They read:

The next one won't come by mail.

"Present?" said Claggett.

"Yeah," said Johnny. And one corner of his mouth lifted briefly in a mechanical grin. He laid the box on the desk.

Mel Claggett looked at it and blinked. Then he read the enclosed note, and considered Johnny from under bushy brows almost benignly.

"You make nice friends, Johnny," he ventured.

Johnny Bates had a weathered look like a seasoned saddle. He was slender to the point of being a trifle ribby, and sleepy-eyed, but nevertheless there was about him something that reflected spring steel.

The sheriff said: "What did you find at Mescal?"

"Not much," Johnny said, leaning against the wall and starting a systematic search for papers and tobacco. "Old Man Hart was bushwhacked, and the Bald-Faced Kid killed Jack Rawls in front of the Red Door Saloon without any show to pull his gun."

"That all?" Claggett pursed his lips.

"Yeah—practically." Johnny gave the final expert touches to his brown-paper cigarette, lighted it and erupted smoke with a soft sigh.

Claggett appeared lost in meditation. His eyes had a look of smoldering craft. At length, he mused, almost more to himself than Johnny: "The Cross L done figger that might is right. I been years a-buildin' my fences. It wouldn't hardly seem sensible to invite trouble by tryin' to smoke out that Lute outfit right now."

"No, that's right," Johnny agreed dryly. He looked at Claggett through the smoke, his eyes filming far vistas, which gradually blocked out the sheriff's wily features and painted stars and blue nights and campfires in the sage.

"You see how it is," Claggett said.

"Sure," Johnny said. "The Lute crowd just killed a couple cowmen, burned some ranch buildin's, stole a widow's cattle an' done told the law to get a long ways remote."

Claggett picked up the bullet and rolled it across his palm. "You wouldn't want to go back to Mescal—would yuh, Johnny?"

"Who—me?" Johnny said innocently. He squinted one eye and considered Claggett. It reminded the sheriff of a man looking over the sights of a Winchester.

"It could be arranged," Claggett went on, rolling his words out with a slight purr. "Yuh seem to take such a right smart, not to say sympathetic, interest in affairs in that damnation hell-hole."

"I kinda left word I *might* be back." The deputy addressed the fly-specked wall behind the sheriff in a soft drawl. "Reckon a hombre could do worse than devotin' a little time to convertin' them gun-foggin' hellions."

Claggett toyed with the bullet, then cocked a jaundiced eye at the other. "Yuh want to leave any forwardin' address, Johnny?"

"Why, if you don't have any word by Saturday," said Johnny Bates, "just write General Delivery, Hell, an' I'll probably get it."

"SUNDOWN" JONES settled himself in the barber chair with a contented sigh. "Pardner," he said, "give me the works. I want to look pretty and smell sweet. I got a date with a sheep-herder's daughter."

Sundown Jones had a docile face, resembling a cow, and large ears and bow legs. He had been a cowboy, a boomer brakeman, a bronc snapper and sage rat. He had suffered an attack of gold colic, but one gold rush

was enough to convince him that rooting in the ground was no work for an old cowhand.

Mr. Jones had an apathetic eye and a broken nose, besides possessing a vacant look. However, there were those, including Johnny Bates, who subscribed to the opinion that he had more secrets than a hollow tree.

The arrival of Sundown Jones in Mescal was unheralded and practically unnoticed. He eased into town with no more fuss than a tumbleweed. He stabled his horse, bought a drink, smoked a cigarette and sized up the principal street of Mescal, with its brick bank and rows of false fronts.

Finally he presented himself at Ben Taber's tonsorial emporium. A barber shop was the source of as much local gossip as a late edition tabloid. Mr. Taber was alone in the shop, and he was full of conversation, including various opinions concerning the killing of Old Man Hart. He elaborated on the shooting of Jack Rawls, to which he had been a witness.

It appeared that Mescal was unhealthy for lawmen. In fact, the Bald-Faced Kid had recently served notice on a deputy named Bates to vacate the premises and not to return, under pain of what would amount to a fatal illness.

"Ole Matt Lute an' Claggett is just like that," Mr. Tuber assured the stranger, crossing the first and second fingers of his left hand. "The sher'f just nacherally had to go through the motions of makin' an investigation, ye see. So he sent this young squirt down. The depperty was a sleepy-lookin' cuss. I guess he was short on savvy. Anyhow, he went away finally, an' I don't look for him back."

A puncher with a date in prospect was usually a willing victim, and Mr. Taber suggested a face massage.

"It might help," agreed Sundown. "But if I don't make progress with that sheep-herder's girl, I know a blonde in a Harvey House."

Sundown squirmed under the hot towels, and words continued to drone into his ear.

"Ole Lute is a cute one. He leans a leetle to the pious. He prayed in meetin' one Sunday; he frowns on unwashed sinners. But you take the Notch O now, they're bad medicine. The Bald-Faced Kid an' Lew Tracey run that outfit. But the joke of it is —heh-heh—Lute an' the Cross L owns every iron between here an' the Rio Poco, lock, stock an' barrel—except the Box H."

Suddenly Mr. Taber breathed, in an awed whisper: "Here comes the Bald-Faced Kid now."

The door banged, and the barber said: "Howdy, Kid. Nice day. You're next. T'other barber will be right back."

The Bald-Faced Kid growled a salutation and dropped into a chair. The barber removed the hot towels, and Sundown opened one eye and squinted down his long nose. So this was the hombre who had walked up to the happy-go-lucky Jack Rawls and shot him in the stomach.

The Bald-Faced Kid was short and stocky, with long arms and a face barren of either eyebrows or lashes. His eyes protruded a little, and his mouth wore a set and mirthless grin which was emphasized by two huge buckteeth. He was around thirty-five, Sundown estimated.

"Put a lot of that pink stinkum in the purty bottle," directed Mr. Jones, "for the last coat."

At that moment a slit-eyed puncher with a hawk-nose entered. He sat down beside the Notch O man.

"Say"—the cowboy's voice was low—"Lew says to tell yuh to watch out. That depperty from Dona Ana is back. He was over to the bank with Old Man Hart's widder."

Sundown Jones caught the words. He closed his eyes, then one lid fluttered just a little. He thought he had never seen a look so murderous. The Bald-Faced Kid's thick neck swelled. Muscles along his jaw twitched, and

the veins on his forehead stood out in purpling relief. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, and all the time that mirthless grin clung to his mouth.

The Bald-Faced Kid slanted a quick glance at the lanky figure in the chair. His hand went under his coat and shifted his shoulder holster a little.

"Tell Lew," he said, "that I'll see him in the Red Door Saloon as quick as I get a shave."

The hawk-nosed puncher went out.

BEN TABER scratched his nose. He was watching the Bald-Faced Kid out of the corner of his eye. He had a notion that hell wa'n't half so hot as Mescal was going to be. He kicked the release and erected his customer in the chair. The Bald-Faced Kid looked in the mirror. He couldn't remember that he had ever before seen the flat-faced fellow who was getting the beauty treatment.

The other barber came in, smelling of bay rum and whiskey. The Kid eased himself into the second chair. There was silence now, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the wall.

And then a shadow slid across the threshold and a slim-waisted figure opened the screen. It was Johnny Bates. Ben Taber's eyes got big. The Bald-Faced Kid rolled his head on the padded rest, and stiffened. His right hand shifted position under the billowing apron that was spread across him. The fingers flattened, and inched craftily toward the gun-butt at his left armpit.

Sundown Jones looked straight ahead, staring blankly at Johnny Bates in the mirror.

Ben Taber jerked his head toward the bench along the wall. "You're next," he gulped.

Johnny Bates was looking at the Bald-Faced Kid. "That's what they tell me," he said succinctly.

Two men walked past on the sidewalk a little hurriedly, glancing into the barber shop without slowing their stride. Across the street, a group had gathered in front of the bakery. Their eyes were on Ben Taber's establishment.

A man wearing cowboy boots was stumping hurriedly along the plank sidewalk toward the Morning Glory Saloon. Three riders were dismounting at the hitch rack. One of them was a powerful man with a beard. It was Matt Lute. The puncher saw the cowman and cut across the street, waving his hand.

The four men knotted into a tight group, while their gaze searched out the pole with the faded red, white and blue stripes. A short laugh gurgled from Matt Lute's beard, mirthless as the clatter of a breechlock.

It was then that Alvira Hart came out of the bank and walked with slow, heavy-footed tread toward Andy Boyd's general store. She was not an old woman, but the lines of her face and the stoop of her shoulders and the leaded weariness of her eyes told a story of pyramiding years of toil, of despair and of ultimate defeat on a range that these last years had been stained with the blood of her menfolks.

Matt Lute's eye held a wicked gleam, as he watched her advancing along the sidewalk. That was her rig —the buckboard and the claybank and the pinto with the Box H roughed on their shoulders, there in front of the store.

The woman's eyes were turned toward him now and they lighted somewhat. Matt Lute bowed almost a little too courteously.

"Howdy, Alvira." The tone was solicitous. "How be ye?"

"Arternoon, Matt." The old edge was gone from her voice, like a blade dulled on a stony field.

"Anythin' I kin do, Vira, don't hesitate."

"Why, now, that's right kind of ye. Yes; I reckon there is. I—I wonder if ye'd mind meetin' me at the bank about two o'clock."

Something flared briefly under the surface in Matt Lute's dead-gray eyes. "Why, shorely." His tongue caressed his thick lips in the jungle of his beard.

Lute had always professed the utmost friendship for Jonas Hart. When the fight over water broke on the Oxbow, it had been Lute who sent his riders to help the Box H, as the dazed blundering Jonas struggled in the swale of enemies.

And it was the widow of Jonas Hart who looked to Lute now for assistance. She was still stupefied by the tragedy of her husband's death, and by the killing of Jack Rawls, the foreman. She was walking blindly, prayerfully in a maze she couldn't understand.

Only the night before, Johnny Bates had tapped softly on the ranch door. The same dry, sleepy-eyed Johnny who had drifted now and then to the valley range at round-up time, to help work the herds. Johnny Bates, who rode a little, sang a little, joked a little and went away to other camp fires in the sage.

Johnny, with a shiny star on his vest, had whispered friendly words, strange words. "Want you in town tomorrow," he had said. "And don't tell anybody that Johnny Bates was shovin' around loose out in the moonlight with the coyotes, Ma."

He'd always called her "Ma," Johnny had.

Mrs. Hart went on to the store. Lew Tracey came out of the Red Door Saloon. He was a hard-lined, angular man with a scar across his chin. His reputation was that of a gun-fighter rather than a cowman.

The fact that Lew Tracey wore a *buscadero* belt was enough in itself to stamp him as a tough hombre who liked to parade his accomplishments. That five-inch wide belt had a slotted flap at the hip into which a holster had been fitted, being in effect a one-piece holster and belt.

The white-handled Colt was thus held firmly in position for a fast draw always, and spoke a challenge not to be regarded lightly. There was a smoky film in the man's eye that was almost like an eternal haze of gun smoke.

He approached Matt Lute, and they stood a little apart now, conversing in low tones.

Lute said: "I been in tech with Claggett. He's takin' a hands-off stand, because if he's beat at election he kin thank our crowd fer it. He don't figger none on crossin' me. It will pay him not to. Mel made pore investments, an' it would be mighty inconvenient fer him to wake up a settin' on the co'rt-house steps some mornin' with the doorknob in his hand."

"What's that damn depperty doin' back here then?" demanded Tracey.

" 'Low he aims to make a personal issue out of it. Claggett washed his hands. Me bein' a clost friend of the Harts, the sher'f was bound to accept my view on the matter, the weak-kneed ole fool. I done told him it was a case of Jonas an' Rawls both drawed first, which made the shootin's self-defense, sorry as I was to see good men gunned down."

"Claggett has been between the hair an' the halter ever since he got in politics," Tracey said. He added venomously: "Bates is the same as layin' on a shutter. The Kid an' me an' a couple of the boys are fixin' to make it look like he went hog wild out here in the street, an' was endangerin' the lives of citizens."

"Talk with the marshal?" asked Lute.

"Shore. 'Bull' Jacobs says he'll make out an affidavit."

JOHNNY BATES took off his hat and coat. Sundown Jones climbed out of the barber's chair and he stood for a moment, turning his head from side to side before the mirror. He was humming an old cowboy ballad, as he gave his hair a finishing touch.

"They dug her grave both deep an' wide
An' buried sweet Willie by her side . . . ."

The deputy unbuckled the strap of his shoulder holster and took off the harness and hung it on a hook. Sundown eyed the weapon.

"Mind if I take a look at your hogleg, sher'f?"

"No," said Johnny, "only don't shoot any of these gentlemen."

Sundown balanced the S. A. Colt in his hand, and sang in a cracked voice:

"An' on her grave set a tur-rtle dove.
To show the world they died for love."

Sundown thumbed the long hammerpiece experimentally. The muzzle swung toward the Bald-Faced Kid. The other's eyes widened, and his face blotched with rage.

"Don't point that damned gun at me!" he yelled.

Mr. Jones regarded the other tolerantly. "I never shot a hombre by *accident* in my life," he said.

The Bald-Faced Kid snarled at the barber. "That's all. Once over. I'm in a hurry."

When, to the infinite relief of Ben Taber, Johnny Bates left the barber shop, Sundown Jones was leaning against a piazza post in front of Andy Boyd's store, a cigarette hanging indolently from the corner of his mouth.

The wary eye of the rejuvenated Mr. Jones roamed the street. There was a hushed atmosphere hovering over the town that was like the lull before the storm. Ben Taber was in front of the barber shop talking excitedly to a little group.

Matt Lute was standing on the corner by the bank, a bristling figure, and beside him the burly marshal, Jacobs. Behind the glass of a front window was the face of Mescal's Shylock, the bald and ferret-faced Lot Goodspeed.

Johnny Bates had stepped into the saddle shop for a moment. He came out now, whistling softly. As he came abreast of the store, the conversation there dwindled suddenly to a dead silence.

Johnny spoke casually to Sundown Jones. "Cloudin' up a little in the west, neighbor."

"Yeah," said Sundown. "I look for a squall."

Mrs. Hart came out of the store, and her face lighted when she saw Johnny Bates. Somehow, after the terror-ridden months on the Box H, her feet had the feel of being on firm ground. That star, shining on Johnny's vest, was like the first bright glimmer in the heavens when the clouds begin to break.

"Reckon we might's well be gettin' over to the bank, Ma," Johnny said. "Lute's there."

"He's a neighborly man," said Mrs. Hart.

"Yeah." The corner of the deputy's mouth twitched a little. "He sure is."

THEY walked along the sidewalk together. Sundown went into the store, and, after some haggling, purchased a kerchief and looked at some spurs. He next drifted into the Red Door Saloon.

The Bald-Faced Kid and Lew Tracey stood at one end of the bar. They held frowning appraisal of the stranger. Mescal looked with some disfavor on pilgrims, for sometimes they turned out to be brand inspectors, or cowboy detectives.

There were no apparent bulges of a suspicious nature about the stranger's clothes. Lew Tracey gave an almost imperceptible shrug, but the bug eyes of the Bald-Faced Kid continued to stare for a little from under the hairless lids, as though prodding for things beneath the surface.

When Matt Lute went into the bank, Lot Goodspeed motioned him into the dingy inner office. Lute said: "What's up?"

Goodspeed's voice had a rasp. "I don't like the look of things, Matt."

"That depperty have a song an' dance?"

"He didn't have much to say, but Miz Hart has got the notion she wants to see about them notes."

"Wants to see about—?" Lute was shrilly incredulous.

"What'd ye tell her?"

"I told her to come back a little later," said the banker. "That damn upstart of a depperty said she'd better get you here, too."

The weazened teller stuck his head in the door. "Here's Missus Hart an' Mister Bates."

Matt Lute stiffened like an angered adder at sight of the deputy. A terrible hatred smouldered in his eyes. He did not speak. Lot Goodspeed ran his hand over his shiny pate in a nervous gesture.

He pushed a chair toward the woman with his foot. "Set down," he directed shortly.

Johnny Bates moved his head up and down the approximate distance required to trip a firing-pin. It went for a nod.

Lot Goodspeed cleared his throat noisily, rolled his eyes at the owner of the Cross L, then slanted a glance at Johnny Bates. The deputy was leaning indolently against the wall. At the moment his drowsy eye held to the window that offered a view of the street with what appeared to be utter indifference.

Mrs. Hart explored the folds of her skirt until she found the opening of a pocket. Slowly she extracted a man's worn leather wallet. Matt Lute stared at it and rolled his thick lips until they showed red in his beard. Suddenly, at sight of the sheaf of bills within, his jaw grew rigid, his fingers clenched.

Something was happening that he could not understand. The key to the kingdom of the Oxbow was, and had always been, the water rights of Jonas Hart's Box H ranch. He had coveted the liquid gold that was attached to the original three hundred and sixty acres of the home ranch, as the needs of the expanding Cross L herds grew.

Jonas Hart had been contented to remain a cowman with a comparatively small spread, there in the valley of the Oxbow, while Matt Lute, consumed by greed, crowded closer, waiting, like a vulture, for the opportunity that was bound to come.

And then, with beef prices at dead low, Jonas Hart, gambling that the pendulum must swing in a year or so, had borrowed five thousand dollars to tide him over—had borrowed at the bank in Mescal on his cattle.

But rustlers looted his range. Cows with swollen bags bawled in vain for their calves. Slicks or orejanas were crowded south by furtive riders, to wear at last the iron of the Cross L. Box H riders were harassed by unseen enemies, and always Matt Lute played the rôle of good neighbor.

When the time came to take up the note, secured by Box H cattle, blazing guns and night stampedes made the attempted beef roundup a futile effort. It had been then that Matt Lute loaned Jonas Hart two thousand dollars, enough to satisfy Lot Goodspeed temporarily.

With that money, secured by the home ranch, the old cowman had started for Mescal. He had been killed and robbed on the trail. Matt Lute later rode to a high shoulder and looked down on the valley of the Box H and stroked his beard.

Jack Rawls, foreman, had been shot, and Mrs. Hart, mothering her bewildered youngsters, had been left alone to face the wolves of the range, with a skeleton crew of scared riders.

THE voice of Mrs. Hart broke the suddenly electric atmosphere of the little room. "I want to take up that note." She was looking at Lot Goodspeed. Then she began to slowly count out the money.

Johnny Bates was rolling a cigarette, rolling it slowly painstakingly. His eye went at last to the banker.

"Yuh reckon you can produce that note, neighbor?"

"You mind your business," snarled Goodspeed.

"I am," said Johnny, holding the cigarette by the twisted end and regarding it speculatively. "I'm buyin' an interest in the Box H an' I sorta figgered on tearin' up this here little scrap of paper."

"You're buyin' an interest in the Hart spread?" yelled Lute, crouching in his chair with the tenseness of a cornered cougar.

"Well, perhaps not exactly *buyin'* an interest," drawled Johnny Bates, "but I'm bettin' five thousand and a little bit that we throw enough law into the Oxbow to put the fear of the devil into the crowd that's tryin' to gut the Box H."

Matt Lute stormed to his feet. "You know what's good fer ye, you'll stay out of the Oxbow!" he cried hoarsely.

"What is this all about anyway?" demanded Goodspeed.

"Well, in effect," said Johnny, "we're holdin' a murder trial—among other things."

"Murder trial?" screamed Lute.

"I reckon you'd say it amounts to that, *amigo*." The slender figure by the door straightened with willowy ease and looked Lute squarely in the eye. "Open-air court. The Bald-Faced Kid killed Jack Rawls, an' that blaze-faced hombre an' Lew Tracey dry-gulched Old Man Hart."

For the moment Lute was inarticulate. Johnny was saying: "Yeah. An' robbed him. How did the Bald-Faced Kid an' Tracey know Old Man Hart had that money? Mister, when you answer that, I can think of plenty more questions."

A low exclamation breathed from the lips of Mrs. Hart. She was suddenly trembling. She stared at Lute, seeing for the first time the explanation for many things.

"No! It isn't so! It kain't be. You were our friend, Matt." The woman's voice was dull. Words choked her. "Ye offered that loan of yore own free will. Ye said Lot Goodspeed was goin' to demand payment in full because the note was overdue." She looked at Johnny Bates. "Why didn't ye tell me."

"I didn't know for sure about some things, when I was out to the ranch," Johnny said. "There's more too, Ma. This old weazened money-grabber ain't got that note. He sold it to Lute two days after it was made out." He glanced at the banker.

"The bank had too many frozen assets!" cried Goodspeed. "I had to liquidate some of the paper we had."

Outside the door, Lot Goodspeed's man, Friday, was listening wide-eyed. He turned toward the teller's cage as Bull Jacobs, the marshal, entered, stumbling against the high stool on which he spent his life.

He pressed his face against the wicket, the thin wisps of hair that usually were plastered across his bald spot all awry.

"There's goin' to be trouble!" he panted. "There's hellta pay. That sprout of a depperty is callin' Lot an' Matt. Oh, mercy, how he's callin' 'em!" He rolled fearful eyes toward the closed door.

"What's that?" grunted the marshal, blinking stupidly. "What the hell are ye sayin'?"

"The depperty says the Bald-Faced Kid an' Lew Tracey killed Hart, an' Lute the same as put 'em up to it. I tell ye, somebody's goin' to get killed."

Bull Jacobs showed his teeth. "It ain't hard to figger out who it's goin' to be."

The dead silence of the street only emphasized the songs of the hot-birds. The drone of their rasping chatter was like the dry purr of a rattler. The strange hush was further emphasized by the absence of movement. The town stood still and held its breath.

All except Sundown Jones.

One gaudy touch of color was there against the dead, brown background.

It was a bit of flaming yellow—the kerchief, loosely knotted, about the scrubbed neck of Mr. Jones.

He came out of the stable yard leading a saddled pinto. They started down the middle of the street and a thin veil of dust followed them. The square butt of a carbine stood out of a scabbard under the right-hand stirrup leather. A lariat was coiled at the horn.

Sundown's hat was pushed back a little on his head, and he was whistling softly through his teeth. He wore now a holstered six-shooter; a thong of leather held the half-breed holster to his right thigh.

IT was a kind of one-cowboy parade. Ben Taber stared, and something began to stir at the pit of his stomach, almost as though he had eaten some jumping beans and the heat had started them off in their silly little dance. There was a vague atmosphere surrounding that slow march which seemed to hold an ominous significance—like the mechanical hike of a firing squad.

The Bald-Faced Kid was lounging at the mouth of an alley adjoining the bank. Lew Tracey was across the street, the butt of a white-handled six-shooter standing out clearly against his wide belt. Two Notch O punchers were sitting on the rickety steps of the Chinese laundry.

Johnny Bates let his eye slide past Matt Lute to the window. A dab of color appeared at the far end of the street. It was Sundown Jones' gaudy kerchief.

Matt Lute's eyes were bloodshot. He was breathing hard.

"I got men posted on that street out there, depperty!" he said with guttural menace. "You be careful—"

"Listen, *ladron!*" snapped Johnny. "We ain't out there. This is private—between you an' me."

Johnny didn't take his eyes from the Matt Lute, but he spoke to Mrs. Hart. "Ma, just lay that money on the table, an' you go on over to the hotel."

"Why are ye doin' this fer me, Johnny?" There was a break in the woman's voice. "Nothin' matters, only the children. I—I don't know what to say."

"It's all right," Johnny said. "My old dad had a little money in his poke when he went, an' I aimed to put it into cattle anyhow."

"I still hold the paper on the ranch, don't fergit that," Lute flung at them.

"It's no good," Johnny said. "You can't make paper stick on homestead land. Anyhow that two thousand went into the pocket of a couple of your hired hands. I cold-trailed the hombres who killed Old Man Hart, an' found his wallet in a *barranco* down back of the Notch O."

The woman moved toward the door. "Bless ye, Johnny," she said, tears rolling down her weathered cheeks. "Jonas loved ye like a son. I can't repay ye—never."

"I ain't much of a lawman, Ma," Johnny said. "Just an old cowhand, smellin' the sage—an' rememberin' that you an' Jonas was always mighty swell to me."

Mrs. Hart turned and went out the door.

"Now, Lute," Johnny said, "tear up that note."

"I ain't got it with me," in a sullen growl.

"Never mind. Goodspeed, you write out a receipt for Mrs. Hart, an' witness Lute's signature. Call in that teller. He's a notary."

When at last Johnny slowly folded the scrap of paper, Matt Lute was like a seething volcano on the verge of eruption.

"Ye ain't out of Mescal yet!" he cried. "An' ye never will git out. The Bald-Faced Kid an' Tracey will gun ye into the dirt like they would a sneakin' kioty."

"Maybe," Johnny said, "but I got chips that says there's goin' to be

hombres in this stink-hole that sincerely regret they don't send *all* their lead by mail before I receipt for my last C. O. D. package."

Johnny stepped away from the door, and made a little bow. "An' now, *amigo mio,* spread the tidin's."

Matt Lute drove past the panic-stricken teller and the screen exploded outward.

The cowman's voice rose to a bull-throated roar. "The lawman's talkin' big! He's threatenin' what he's goin' to do! Let's see if he's got guts to come out that door. I'm a-sayin' he ain't. I'm a-sayin' we got to smoke him out."

Lew Tracey turned. He had been watching the cowboy in the street with a mystified frown, being resolved to keep an eye on the stranger. He didn't appear to fit into the picture, and still—"

Lute lurched for a doorway. Bull Jacobs was there. The Bald-Faced Kid said something to Lute and edged outward from the mouth of the alley. His body shielded the cocked forty-five which he held in his right hand, at least from Johnny Bates.

Tracey would yell at the deputy, to attract his attention while the Bald-Faced Kid fired as Johnny stepped to the sidewalk. The deputy was coming across the lobby of the bank now. Those in the street could see him through the big glass window. Slanting rays of sunlight touched him, glinted on the five-pointed star on his vest.

He was walking with cool deliberation, walking easily, his hands at his sides. He pushed the screen door open and stepped to the sidewalk.

Sundown Jones had dropped back even with the stirrup.

THE BALD-FACED KID had reached the belated conclusion that there was something wrong with this walking cowboy. He didn't belong here at this particular moment. At that instant Johnny Bates occupied his attention, however.

Lew Tracey stepped into the street. He lifted the white-handled gun from its holster. The two Notch O punchers snapped to their feet, and deployed, one to the right of Tracey, and one to the left. Johnny Bates, finding several menacing figures converging on him would be slowed in his reactions. Not much, perhaps, but enough.

Sundown's lips tightened a little. He turned, gave the split reins a quick twist around the saddlehorn, then thumbed the pinto in the belly.

"Ye-e-ip!" The sudden shrill cry shattered the tense silence of the street and was echoed by the bronco's trumpeting squeal.

Sundown adroitly eluded the flying heels, and snapped his Colt from its holster. Dust exploded from under the pile-driving hoofs of the pony.

The hook-nosed henchman of the Bald-Faced Kid, moving out on Lew Tracey's left, hurled himself desperately toward the sidewalk as the lunging, twisting, crow-hopping cow-horse bore down on him. His spur caught the end of a plank and he was dumped on his back an oath grunting out of him.

Lew Tracey's brain told him too late that the gun men of the Notch O had been enmeshed in the duplicity of a dead-pan cowboy who smelled to high heaven of bay rum and hair tonic. He dodged, but the pitching pony followed his every turn with flailing forepaws and bared teeth. He could not know that one Sundown Jones had been to some pains to teach the animal this little act.

The Bald-Faced Kid gritted an oath. His killer gun sped its muzzle in a brief arc, bringing Johnny Bates, exactly fifteen paces distant, under his gunsights. Sundown Jones, calling for cards in the play, opened with a blazing six-shooter. The first bullet shattered the Bald-Faced Kid's right arm. The second drove at his body with sledging impact.

The bald-faced man twisted sideways and spilled slowly onto his face.

Lew Tracey lurched back to the sidewalk and began throwing lead at the slender figure in front of the bank. The pony had charged toward the puncher who had maneuvered on the right of Tracey.

Johnny Bates met the fire of Lew Tracey from a balanced stance that was singularly relaxed. He pulled his Peacemaker Colt from its spring-clip holster under his arm, thumbed the hammer back and hunted out in the dust haze that wide *buscadero* belt.

Suddenly Lew Tracey's eyes wore a look of stupid amazement. He found himself looking down at his gun, discovering that his brain no longer had command of the white-handled six-shooter that had boomed its requiem for Jonas Hart and others, back along the trail.

IT was incredible. There was Johnny Bates, the hated deputy, still standing in front of the door of the bank. He was shooting again. Lew Tracey saw the .45 kick, but he heard no sound. On his left a gun clattered to the plank walk and a man lurched back onto the steps of the Chinese laundry.

Matt Lute saw it happening in front of his eyes, and would not believe it. The Bald-Faced Kid and Lew Tracey were going down like overbalanced meal sacks. Johnny Bates hadn't even shifted his feet.

And there was that cowboy with the yellow kerchief, who had stumped stiffly along the street in his high-heeled boots, a roaring gun in his hand.

Rage fired Matt Lute, an ungovernable fury that for the moment made him forget that until now deadly puppets had danced for him while he remained hidden in the wings. He would kill the meddling deputy himself. His body grew tense.

The marshal jerked at his six-shooter and started into the street. The damned cowboy must have gone crazy. His voice rose in a hoarsely bellowed command, as he cocked a pudgy thumb to indicate the badge on his shirt.

"Drop that six-shooter! This is the law."

It was then that Bull Jacobs glimpsed for the first time a shiny star, looking very new, as Sundown Jones flipped his vest back. His eyes popped until they were like the black centers of twin targets.

Just an instant Matt Lute hesitated, his hand half way to the butt of his forty-five, as his glance darted from Johnny Bates to the yellow kerchief. The big man froze at what he saw, while curt words hammered at his ears.

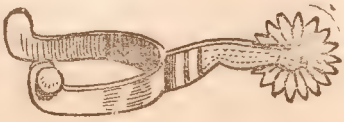
"Hold it, yuh whiskered old hellion!" snapped Sundown Jones. "The party's all over." The muzzle of the cowboy's gun was on him.

With a few dying gasps, Lew Tracey washed his soul by confessing that he and the Bald-Faced Kid had killed and robbed Jonas Hart. There was not time for more.

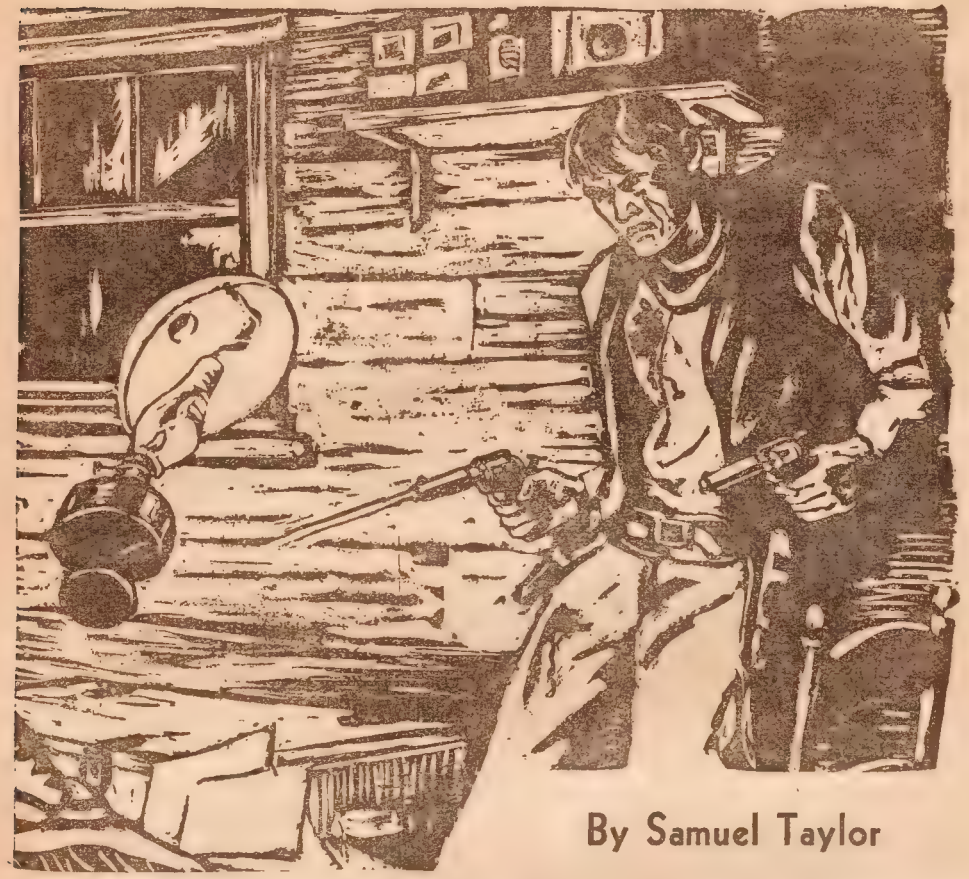
Johnny Bates and Sundown Jones were walking leisurely up the street toward the stable yard, the pinto trailing demurely behind.

Johnny said: "Cowboy, you're a right handy man to have around."

And Sundown Jones answered: "Handy? Hell, smell me. I'm a luxury."



BLACKJACK BOUNTY



By Samuel Taylor

So deeply implanted in the heart of Blackjack Jones was the creed of cowboy loyalty that it could not be worn out by years of bitter struggle or knocked out by the impact of death-hungry lead.

BLACKJACK JONES was singing as he rode his bay gelding under the half moon through the greasewood-spotted hills. He never sang unless he had enough liquor in him to blunt his judgment. When sober, Blackjack knew that his voice was suited more for whooping up the tag end of a trail herd than wailing the uncensored love songs of the range.

His song died as he rounded a low hill and came in sight of his Rafter J spread. A horse was standing in front of the lean-to porch of the shack, and out of the deep moon shadow of the porch protruded a pair of legs.

Blackjack spurred that way. He piled off, dropping a rein, and turned the body over, involuntarily flinching at the sticky warm fluid soaking the man's clothes. He packed him inside

to the bunk and lighted the lamp. Then he made a brief examination of the wounds. The injured man was too far gone to help much. The lank cowboy lashed wads over the holes to stem the flow of blood, then headed for the door to ride for a doctor.

"Blackjack." A tiny voice, high and childlike.

Blackjack turned at the door. "Be back pronto, sheriff, with the sawbones from town. Rest easy."

"No—use," sheriff Mark Wayne muttered. He was a small man, lean and wiry. In the yellow lamplight his blood-drained face looked as if it had a weak coat of whitewash over the tan.

"Come close, Blackjack. I know I'm done for. Don't argue with me. Seen too many men shot up to fool m'self. Didn't think I'd last. But had to. Had to git here.

"Come close, an' listen. Four men robbed the bank over at Hayward t'night. There was some shootin', and one of the robbers lost his mask. Mebbe it fell off or mebbe it was shot away. But he was recognized. I was out scoutin' the hills when I jumped three men a-horseback. I yelled for 'em to stop. They did. Then when I got in gun range they opened up at me. I figure they was three of the robbers, who had the loot on 'em an' shot rather than be recognized and searched. Anyhow, I got away. An' now I want you to go out after the one which lost his mask durin' the bank holdup."

"I'll do it, sheriff," promised the lank cowboy.

Sheriff Mark Wayne's eyes seemed awfully big on the shrunken face. He whispered in that childilke voice: "Blackjack, you've claimed you owed me somethin'. I never figured you did. But if you did, now's the time to pay it back. Bring in that man."

"Do my best, sheriff. Who was he?"

LIDS slid over the sheriff's tired eyes. Blackjack waited, thinking about that debt he owed Sheriff Wayne. When he was younger and wilder, Blackjack had got mixed up with a crew who took things without asking. He had started out on a rustling deal, then got to thinking, and decided he wasn't the sort for that kind of stuff.

When he had tried to pull out, the gang had made trouble, because he knew too much. Shooting, he had got away. Then the gang had tried to frame him by driving some cattle onto his range—brands crudely blotted to his Rafter J iron, to make him look like a rustler. Blackjack had told the story straight to the sheriff, and Wayne had believed him, gone after the gang, got them and secured confessions.

Sheriff Wayne easily enough could have slapped Blackjack in jail, that time. He was unyielding as iron in enforcing the law. But he'd believed the lank cowboy, and cleared him. And now Blackjack had a chance to pay back.

Sheriff Wayne's eyes opened in the leathery face. The voice came in that childlike treble: "Blackjack, it'll be hard enough on my wife, me goin' West. Her in that wheel chair all day, she don't have much besides me and our boy, Tom Ed. Make it easy on her, will you?"

"I'll try. Who was the bank robber whose mask fell off?"

"He's only a young kid full of hell, Blackjack. If he comes clean with the law an' delivers the loot back, it'll only mean a year or so in jail. But unless he's took in now, he'll go from bad to worse. You'll do it, Blackjack?"

"Who was he?"

"He was—" The lids closed again, and the face twisted in pain—"he was —my boy—Tom Ed."

BLACKJACK rode to town, sent a doctor and plump deputy Keating out to the Rafter J. Then the lank cowboy headed towards the sheriff's Bar G outfit on the hardest job of his life. He had to tell crippled

Mrs. Wayne. And then he had to go out and bring Tom Ed Wayne in to the law.

Tom Ed was young, a bit wild. Tom Ed was Blackjack's best friend.

At the Bar G, the lank cowboy clumped over the wooden porch with dragging boots, knocked, went in at the cheery invitation, saw Mrs. Wayne's face cloud at sight of him. The sheriff's wife was a tiny person, vivacious, with sparkling brown eyes contrasting to white hair. She was knitting automatically as she sat in her wheel chair, knitting while she frowned at Blackjack. She didn't like him, because she thought he had a bad influence on Tom Ed, with drinking and gambling.

"Tom Ed isn't here," she said shortly.

Blackjack just kept looking at her, trying to force words through a dry throat.

"What's wrong, John?" she finally asked. She always called him "John" instead of "Blackjack."

He didn't know how to make it softer. Her brown eyes had gone down to the pearl-handled Colt .45 in his belt—the sheriff's gun. There was no color at all in her face. Her veined hands kept fumbling automatically at the knitting.

"Here's his gun," said Blackjack.

Riding back to town, trying to shake away the memory of those helpless, hopeless brown eyes, he got an idea. When he reached town he went to the sheriff's office to find that Keating had returned with the body. Blackjack took the plump deputy aside.

"Me," he said, "I'm goin' out to bring Tom Ed in. I promised the sheriff I would. I know where he'll be. And another thing: his mother won't have to know about him. Understand? Anybody who tells that old lady about Tom Ed will account to me."

"Sure, Blackjack," the chubby deputy agreed. "You figure you can fetch Tom Ed in on account you're his pal, huh?"

"I made a promise," said the lanky cowboy. He didn't miss the sneer in Keating's voice. Going out to bring in his best friend.

DAWN was breaking purple against the black cliffs as Blackjack rode up a narrow canyon east of town. The hoofs of the bay gelding splashed in the little creek, rang iron shoes against rocks. He didn't try for secrecy. He kept watching the cliffs on the left-hand side, and when he came to a twisting crease winding upwards, he dismounted and began to climb.

He was puffing when he crawled upon a flat ledge. Leading back from it, shielded from sight from below, was a natural cave that he and Tom Ed had discovered the previous spring while tracking down a wolf. Nobody else knew of it.

Tom Ed was standing halfway inside the black hole, his right fist sticking out, holding a revolver. Tom Ed Wayne was almost a carbon copy of his father, short and wiry, except his mouth was a bit wider, and a bit slack.

"Hello," he said.

BLACKJACK squatted on worn heels, breathing hard with the climb. He thought a moment, then said:

"Hello, Ed. How'd you get into that deal, anyhow?"

Lean shoulders shrugged in the faint light of the cave opening. "I guess I never could play poker, with this face. I got in a hole."

"Too bad that mask was shot off'n your face, Ed."

Tom Ed kept the Colt level. He said, "Damn it, you can't come here to get me, just 'cause you know about this place. I figured you for a friend."

"That I am, Ed. You don't want to hit the owl-hoot."

Tom Ed's face was gray in the early light. The wide mouth was tight against his teeth.

"Why I played poker in the first

place was on account I had to have money," he muttered. "When that didn't work I tried somethin' else. I'm on the owl-hoot and I'll stay there before I see my mother kicked out of her own house."

"What's that?" Blackjack frowned at this angle.

"Dad's a good sheriff, but a bum rancher. Mother don't know Tip Yalon holds a mortgage on the Bar G. And now she won't have to. Dad will guess how the note was cleared off. But he can't help it if the mortgage is cancelled. He'll never tell mother."

"No; he won't," admitted Blackjack. "He's dead."

Then as the gun wrist lowered, the lank cowboy sprang from his crouch. As the gun came up he knocked it aside and rammed his other fist at the jaw. Tom Ed's head snapped backwards against an outcropping of rock, and the wiry lad sagged down to a limp heap.

TOM ED kept mum at the trial, protecting his companions, refusing to reveal where the bank loot was. Blackjack tried to talk with him. Keating also tried it. Everybody believed Tom Ed's three companions in the holdup had killed his father. Tom Ed wouldn't believe that.

He was sentenced to ten years.

Ten years. Blackjack had sent his friend to prison for ten years. He went to the jail, where Tom Ed was awaiting transfer to the state prison.

"Crawl away from here, snake," Tom Ed snarled from the cell.

Blackjack tried to reason with him. He tried to get him to tell where the bank loot was hidden, even if he didn't name his companions, so that he might get his sentence cut down. But there was no talking to Tom Ed. He was going up for ten years—the best part of his life. Sheriff Wayne hadn't figured on that when he had asked Blackjack to promise to bring the boy to the law. The sheriff had figured maybe one year.

It wasn't worth ten years. There was one thing to do—keep Tom Ed from *going* to prison.

Blackjack rode out to his Rafter J spread and thought it over. At sundown he hitched a team to the buckboard, put a crowbar and a reel of galvanized barbed wire in the bed of the box, covered them with a tarp.

Then he drove to town, went into the saloon and whiled away the time playing blackjack at two-bits a hand. His mind wasn't on his favorite game. Gomez, the slick-haired Mexican dealer, kept flicking out the cards with deft fingers, flicking in the quarters. The saloon was almost empty on Monday night.

Along about ten o'clock Tip Yalon swaggered in with his hulking runner, Cooley, and began bawling for a game of draw poker.

"Gomez," the square-faced loan shark said, "you an' Blackjack will make it four-handed, anyhow, with me an' Cooley. Draw poker's my game, not *that*." He jerked a contemptuous chin at the blackjack table.

"With what you won off from Tom Ed in draw poker, no wonder you like it," Blackjack observed.

Yalon swung his square body close. Cooley hunched alongside, like an ominous shadow. Cooley was a mountain of a man. He looked slow and ponderous, but he was plain black death with a six-gun. Tip Yalon made a good thing out of his loan business, people said. He took all the interest the law allowed and closed in the exact day the principal was due. More than one rancher, caught in his toils, had felt like finishing out with guns. Two had tried it. That's why big Cooley always went around like a shadow to Yalon.

"Mebbe you'd like to pick who I play poker with, cowboy?" Yalon drawled from tight lips.

Blackjack's temper was short right then. "You pick 'em all right," he growled. "Anybody knows that Tom Ed can't play poker worth sour

apples. If he hadn't got in such a hole with losing money, he might not of went to bank robbin'."

HULKING COOLEY took a step forward, a hairy paw rubbing his belt above the handle of his revolver. Beefy Tip Yalon shoved the man mountain aside, and squinted at Blackjack with tiny, unblinking eyes. "Mebbe you'd ought to start in teachin' Sunday school, cowboy," Yalon said flatly. "You're so free with your advice. An' you're such a nice, sweet, lovely example for the little kiddies to foller. Sure, I played poker with Tom Ed, an' I played to win, like I always do. People say I'm hard. They say I'd kick a widow an' her babies out into the snow the day her note fell due. Mebbe I would.

"But," Yalon advised, "if my best friend was a-hidin' out where only I knew where to git him, an' if I went out and brung him in to the law—for a measely two hundred and fifty bucks reward—well, cowboy, I might love money, but I reckon I don't love it that much. But if I did, then I wouldn't go around tellin' other people how to act."

Blackjack was trembling. He couldn't fight back against this sort of thing. He turned to the blackjack table, and upped his bets to five dollars a hand.

Playing recklessly, he won for a while, and then began losing again. By midnight he was strapped. He went outside climbed in the buckboard, and went about springing Tom Ed from jail.

He drove out of town, turned the rig left in the brushy gully parallel and north of the town's single street, left the rig there and drove the team back, toting the crowbar and spool of wire, until he was opposite the jail. He crawled up the side of the little ravine and looked around at the rear of the building. No lights in the sheriff's office or the cells at the rear. Keating, who now was sheriff, no doubt was asleep in the hotel. The little place sported no regular jailor.

The lank cowboy went down to the horses in the gully, attached the end of the barbed wire through the wagon-hammer hole of the doubletree, went up the side of the brushy ravine and across the greasewood flat to the rear of the jail, unrolling the wire spool along the ground and toting the crowbar.

He whispered at the right cell window: "Ed!"

"Get away from here," growled Tom Ed from the black interior.

"I'm goin' to spring you, Ed."

"You can't square things, now. Get out of here!"

Blackjack worked fast with pliers and wire, and a crowbar to fashion a pry for one of the bars. The crowbar was eight feet long. Seven-to-one mechanical advantage, and a team of good horses onto that.

"I'll spring you," he growled. "And you can do what you want to when you git out."

"I won't take this from *you!*" snarled Tom Ed from inside.

Blackjack backed away over the flat, keeping the wire on the end of the bar tight, letting it out as he walked backwards.

He was half-way to the gully when a gun blasted from the moon shadow on the left of the stone jail. No warning. Just the shot. His hat hopped from his head. Blackjack beat it to the ground, getting out his revolver. Three deep shapes in that shadow. Lying prone, the lank cowboy eared back the knurled hammer of his peacemaker, laid the sights on one of the black figures. Then he held his fire. After all, breaking a jail is outside the law. These three had a right to shoot, even if they were the type to fire first and talk afterwards. They were blasting at him now, but not advancing from the shelter of the building.

Blackjack squirmed behind a greasewood hummock, coiled long legs under him, uncoiled in a darting run for the ravine. He thanked the

tricky moonlight as he dived to cover in the ravine. Snipping the wire from the doubletree, he drove his team at a run along the gully, holding the doubletree with one hand so it wouldn't hit the horses' heels. Shortly, he was driving along the north road to his ranch at an easy trot.

When a body of horsemen pounded up the road from behind and said they were looking for somebody who had tried to break Tom Ed from jail, Blackjack was all innocence.

"Like to ketch that hombre," he declared. "Tryin' that after all the trouble I had puttin' Tom Ed *in* jail!"

TOM ED went to prison. Blackjack took an old letter that Tom Ed had written him when he was on a trip, and laboriously imitated the writing. He made up a batch of letters, signed Tom Ed's name, and gave them to a friend who worked on the railroad with instructions to mail one a week to the Widow Wayne.

The folks of the little town joined in the deception. Tom Ed was supposed to have got a government job inspecting cattle. Nobody told the little old lady in the wheelchair that her son was in prison.

In a couple of months, Blackjack went to Tip Yalon's loan office. Hulking Cooley was slumped like a watching hairy bear on a chair in the corner.

"Well, cowboy?" asked square-faced Tip Yalon.

"It's about the Widow Wayne's mortgage."

Yalon bit off the end of his cigar and spat it out.

"Falls due thirty days from last Tuesday. Ain't even been interest paid since the sheriff died. Got to close in. Business is business, cowboy. What is it to you, anyhow?"

Blackjack rubbed his lean jaw. "Then there ain't been nothin' paid in since the sheriff was killed?"

"Why should there be? The Widow don't even know about it, and Tom Ed is where he can't raise cash. Oh," said Yalon, his square face lifting to a heavy grin. "You figured that some of that bank loot might be paid on account?" Yalon rumbled a short laugh. "If that's it, think again. Outlaws have short gratitude."

"Ye-ah," admitted the cowboy, thinking of the added years Tom Ed had received as sentence because he had shielded the gang. He started to go out, then turned back. "Yalon, ain't there some way to keep that mortgage goin' a while longer, instead of you foreclosin'?"

"Suggestin' which?" Yalon squinted calculatingly.

"I mean this way. The Rafter J spread which my old man left me is in pretty fair shape. You take a mortgage on it for back payments an' interest on the Bar G. Then I'll do what I can to pay off on both outfits."

A gleam of avarice came into Yalon's little eyes. Yalon was always one who could wait a little, if it meant a profit— if it meant taking two outfits instead of one.

"Why, sure, cowboy. I'll fix up the papers."

"And listen," advised Blackjack. "This is quiet, see? Don't you tell nobody."

BLACKJACK JONES quit drinking, quit gambling, and settled down to plain hard work. He cut expense on every corner, did enough work for three men in busy seasons to save wages. He rolled his Durham thin, squeezed every dime until it oozed sweat. Maybe people wondered what changed easy-going Blackjack Jones into a fool for work. His long frame got leaner. He looked like a scarecrow in clothes patched and repatched. In slack times at the ranch he'd pick up a little work in town.

The little old lady at the Bar G liked him, now. Blackjack attended to her business for her, kept a hired hand there all the time. She seemed the only one who didn't blame him for turning Tom Ed over to the law.

"I'm so glad you quit drinking and gambling and settled down," she would say when he called around. She was so cheery, there in her wheel chair, knitting. "Go and get some cookies from the stone jar, John," she would say. "I heard from Tom Ed the other day. He's getting along all right. Getting along fine."

Three years, five, six . . . . Blackjack kept up the payments, somehow, on both ranches cutting down the principal bit by bit, paying through the nose on that compounded usury.

PLUMP Sheriff Keating rode out to the Rafter J one day, sat with leg draped around saddle horn, watching Blackjack fixing a stable door. Finally he drawled:

"Got word that Tom Ed got out of prison yesterday. Got full time off for good behavior."

The hammer fell upon the lank cowboy's hand. He stooped slowly for it, and when he straightened his face was impassive.

"Glad he's squared up with the law," he said.

Blackjack went to town shortly afterwards. Hulking Cooley was taking the sun in front of Yalon's office. Blackjack passed him with a nod going in, and spoke to Yalon at the desk:

"Yalon, I want to settle up on the Bar G account."

The square face of the loan shark smiled heavily. "Fine." But the smile was superficial. Yalon didn't like accounts paid out. He liked interest, and forced sales.

"Ain't got the cash," Blackjack admitted. "But I've figured a deal. My Rafter J outfit ought to be worth anyhow ten thousand above what I owe you on it. There's a shade over four thousand still due on the Widow's account. You take my ranch and give me five thousand cash, and mark off the Widow's debt. It's a good deal for you."

Yalon's beefy face frowned. "Dunno. Money's tight. . . ."

"All right. Then you name the proposition."

"Well, cowboy, I'll take your spread to wipe out what's due on the Bar G. Straight across. Take it or leave it."

"You'll beat me out of six thousand dollars, thataway."

"Take it or leave it, cowboy."

Blackjack spat out the door. "I'll take it, you coyote."

This time Yalon's square face really smiled. "I'll have the papers fixed up by morning, cowboy."

BLACKJACK rode out to his outfit and began making a pack. Blankets, grub and a pack horse. He'd start again somewhere else. He'd leave in the morning, as soon as he signed the papers with Yalon. Some might call it running away. The cowboy didn't try to name it. He just wanted to be out of the way when Tom Ed returned. He didn't want to be the cause of Tom Ed getting into any more trouble. He was Tom Ed's friend.

He got his pack roped inside the soogans and sat there atop it, smoking one brown-paper cigarette after another, while it got dark. It was bleak, this last night on the outfit he'd worked on so long and hard. Out in the night came the desolate wail of a coyote. Occasionally a hoof would thump in the stable.

Then he was conscious of another sound in the night. Feet were coming outside in a slow, measured tread.

Blackjack stood up, glided to the wall in the darkness, took his gun and belt from the wooden peg and buckled the hardware on while those slow, implacable footsteps neared. The feet clumped loudly over the wooden porch, scrapingly. The latch bar thumped up, door screaked open, and in the oblong a man was silhouetted against the starlight outside. The man wore a shapeless store suit and a cheap cap, the sort they give released prisoners.

"Blackjack," said Tom Ed into the darkness.

"Move easy, Ed," advised Blackjack. "I've got you covered."

Tom Ed came into the room. He pitched forward heavily onto the floor.

Blackjack got the lamp going. Tom Ed had a slug through him. He had thinned out in prison, so that he was hardly more than hide and bone. Skin was a pasty white, eyes were big.

"I'm all right," he mumbled. "Stumbled. Tired. Been hoofin' it a long ways."

"Who done it?"

"Yalon. Him and his two monkeys —Cooley an' the Mexican blackjack dealer from the saloon, Gomez. I come in on the train this evenin', went to Yalon an' told him to git out of town before sunup. Then I borrowed a horse an' started for home, but they bushwhacked me. Made a run for it, before they cut down the horse. I sneaked away in the brush while they was lookin' for me."

"Yalon, Cooley an' Gomez," mused Blackjack, binding up the thin man's wound. "Them the three which was in with you on that bank holdup?"

THE white face nodded. "Reckon I got the right to tell, after what they've done. Yalon was in deep with the bank, and wanted to get the paper the bank held of his—as well as anything else he could pick up. My end of the swag was to be that he'd chalk off the mortgage on the Bar G."

"Do you still think it wasn't them which killed your dad?"

"I'd believe anything of 'em now. And soon as I git well, I'll square up with 'em."

"How come you ordered Yalon and his crew out of town?"

"Because he didn't cancel that mortgage on the Bar G like he promised to do. On account of his promise I kept my mouth shut at the trial."

"How'd you find out he didn't cancel the mortgage?"

"Mother wrote me in prison that you was payin' out on it."

"She—" Blackjack gulped, wiping a hand over his eyes.

"She found the mortgage papers in dad's desk, sent for Yalon, and got the facts," explained Tom Ed. "And I wrote her where I was at. I knew I couldn't fool her. She ain't the kind can be fooled. Her letters to me helped a lot."

Blackjack's lean neck bobbled again. Then Widow Wayne had

known all along? And she hadn't said a word about those faked letters that Blackjack had been getting to her weekly. Things were coming too fast for the lank cowboy to figure out.

When they were going towards the Bar G, with Tom Ed riding the bed of the buckboard, the wiry ex-convict said, "Blackjack, this is my affair. Don't you go tryin' to settle up with Yalon. I'll do that. All I've got to do is talk."

"Your truth against their lies wouldn't stand up in court."

"Yes it would. I got a couple of facts that Yalon can't explain away. He knows that. That's why he tried to kill me tonight."

The rig rumbled over the dusty road. Blackjack did some thinking. Yalon, Cooley, Gomez. They had killed Sheriff Mark Wayne. They had stopped the jail break, because Yalon was greedy enough to want Tom Ed to be safe in prison, where he would be helpless when Yalon foreclosed on the Bar G.

Reaching the Bar G, Blackjack toted the wounded man inside. Widow Wayne looked across the room in the lamplight at her son limp in the tall man's arms. She kept knitting mechanically.

"Put him in his old bedroom, John," she said, wheeling the way in her chair to open the door. "I've kept it ready for him. Go out to the bunkhouse and send Will for a doctor. You stay here and help me, John. There was iron courage in that little old lady.

BLACKJACK sent the hand for the doctor, came in and stoked up the fire, set water on to heat, went to the door of the bedroom, then edged away. Tom Ed and his mother were talking in low tones, and what they would say would be private.

The lank cowboy went over to the lava rock fireplace to roll a brown-paper cigarette, so as not to sift Durham on the spotless floor. Then he let the tobacco sift onto the hearth, and the paper fluttered from relaxing fingers.

Yalon had come noiselessly through the front door. Behind him came slick-haired Gomez, the lamplight shining on his olive face. Hulking Cooley filed in last.

The three held naked six-guns. Yalon jerked his square head, and with a hunch of a slope shoulder Cooley nudged the door shut.

Blackjack said, "You can't get away with this sort of deal."

"Mebbe so, cowboy," Yalon advised. "We saw the hand ride away for a doctor. Figured Tom Ed would come here. We was a-layin' in the creek willows when you fetched him in the rig. Lucky you showed up. Saves me a trip over to your place."

"Who's out there?" called the voice of Widow Wayne from the bedroom. Her wheel chair creaked through the doorway.

"You miserable—you miserable—*skunks!*" she cried. "Get out of my house!"

"My house," corrected Yalon suavely. "Gomez, go to that door an' keep Tom Ed covered so's he won't try crawlin' out of bed for a gun. You, Blackjack, turn around. Cooley, take his iron. All right, now turn back, Blackjack. I got business before the fireworks."

Blackjack turned to face them again. Yalon was fishing some papers out of the inside pocket of his coat.

"Just in case there's a hitch," the square-faced loan shark explained. "I stand to take this ranch and your Rafter J outfit, anyhow, more'n likely. But when you and the widow sign these here, then there won't be no hitch a-tall."

Greed was showing so plainly in the beefy face. Yalon was possessed with greed. He couldn't even come to kill without thinking of his profit first.

"You still can't git away with it," Blackjack said, stalling for time. Anything might happen, with time.

"And why can't I, cowboy? I've got

to shut Tom Ed up. Everybody knows he'll come back gunnin' for you, on account of you sending him to prison. So if the pair of you are found shot full of holes, why, people will just figure it was a shoot-out."

Blackjack's eyes went to the woman in the wheelchair, then back to Yalon.

"Sign that!" roared Yalon. Even a man like him didn't like to think about murdering an old woman. But the widow would be a witness.

"Hurry, my friend," said sleek-haired Gomez from the open door of the bedroom.

BLACKJACK got pen and ink from the fireplace mantle, dipped the pen, paused with it poised above the paper.

"I'll sign anything I got away," he said. "But you've got to leave Tom Ed and his mother alone. Tom Ed will keep his mouth shut. He and his mother will never make any trouble—"

"No!" snapped the widow from her chair. She was mechanically knitting. "I'll make no such bargain with this pack of coyotes! They'll have to kill me to keep my mouth closed! From what Tom Ed tells me, I know they're the skunks who shot my husband! I've been waiting for over six years to square up with those who did that!"

Blackjack clamped teeth on his thin lower lip.

"Just sign," said Yalon suavely.

Blackjack signed.

"And now you, Mrs. Wayne."

Widow Wayne wheeled her chair close to Blackjack beside the table, fumbled under the knitting on her lap for her glasses. She examined the pen point, tested it on the margin of the paper.

"Hurry up," growled Yalon.

"Don't get in a hurry!" the white-haired old lady snapped. "I'll sign it, as soon as I wipe my glasses. Here, Blackjack, hold this while I wipe my glasses."

It was the first time in her life that the widow had called the lank cowboy "Blackjack" instead of "John." He knew it meant something, even before he saw the .45 Colt she had taken from under her knitting and was passing to him below the edge of the table.

It was her husband's old pearl-handled Colt. Had she kept it handy all this while to square up with her husband's killers?

From his position by the bedroom door, behind the table, sleek-haired Gomez saw the gun, and yelled for Yalon to get aside. Blackjack felt the pearl handle in his palm. As Gomez fired, he lunged aside, to draw the bullet away from the old lady, and cut the Mexican down.

YALON was throwing a furious stream of lead, wildly. It was Cooley who would be deadly with his aim. The cowboy's lunge had carried him so that Yalon was between him and Cooley. As Yalon's hulking henchman lurched aside for a shot, Blackjack let him have it where it counted. Tightening muscles sent Cooley's slug high. It ploughed a clean white line through the cowboy's hair.

Then Yalon connected. The slug seemed to tear Blackjack apart, leaving nothing but a big numb void within him. His gun arm sagged from the weight of the .45, and he couldn't bring it up. He had no sap in his tendons. His knees began buckling. Yalon was taking his time with the next shot, making plenty sure. Blackjack knew he couldn't bring his gun up.

Only the cowboy's mind seemed alive in a dead body as he sagged down slowly towards the floor. Six and a half years of terrible work, with people pointing to him as the man who'd double-crossed his best friend. Then, when it seemed it could be cleared up, when everything was squared between him and Tom Ed—then Yalon had arrived and with the sheer power of bullets was turning the tables.

He couldn't raise his gun. Wouldn't do any good if he could. If he killed

Yalon, then what? Then he'd be indicted for murder.

Yalon shot.

His slug blasted into the floor. Yalon spun half-way around, started to reach up to the sudden black hole in his head, and then went backwards like a thudding log.

Tom Ed was in the bedroom doorway, a little wisp of smoke drifting from the mouth of the weapon he had taken from the dead Gomez.

"Thanks," muttered Blackjack. His knees hit the floor, then his hands. His arms caved in. Through the beating blackness pounding at him he saw plump Sheriff Keating barging through the door. The law.

THE cowboy woke up in bed. He was on an iron cot in Tom Ed's room. Tom Ed was in the big bed across the room, sleeping. Blackjack felt gingerly on the outside of a flannel night shirt, feeling the bandages swathing his left side. Through the closed door leading to the front room came the murmur of voices, a heavy man's voice and that of a woman.

The cowboy edged out of the covers, squirmed to the edge of the cot, got up, holding with his good hand to the back of a chair as the room tilted up on a corner. He had to get Tom Ed away. Tom Ed couldn't go back to prison. Not for killing Yalon's crew.

Blackjack lurched for the calico drapes over the closet in the corner. His clothes were there—and his gun! The weapon was awfully heavy. He dragged back across the room to the door, opened it a crack.

Plump Sheriff Keating was sitting talking to Mrs. Wayne. The dead men had been taken away. Mrs. Wayne was knitting in that automatic way, seemingly calm and poised. There was a woman. A pioneer who had come to the country before barbed wire. She could take anything in stride.

Blackjack opened his mouth to yell at the sheriff, to force him to hitch up a rig so Blackjack could take Tom Ed away. But first he had to get the gun ready. There was no strength in his thumb. He braced the barrel against his leg and tugged at the stiff spring. Meanwhile, the sheriff was talking:

"From what you told me about the gang not making good on that mortgage, Mrs Wayne," Keating said, "I figured they'd do away with Tom Ed —or try to—as soon as he got out of jail, because they'd know he'd get them if they didn't get him. So I moseyed out here to wait, soon as Tom Ed come in on the train. Had a long wait. Saw Yalon and his boys come and hide in the willows. Saw Blackjack drive Tom Ed in on the buckboard. When Yalon come in the house, I crept up to the door and listened, figuring on hearing him talk. He did. I was waiting until you both signed them papers, and then I'd have him dead to rights. The shootin' started so quick it was all over before I got inside."

Blackjack stopped tugging at the hammer of the revolver.

"The sawbones tells us that they'll pull through all right, after a little rest," Keating said. "I guess everything will turn out all right, after all."

"Yes, I believe so," the widow nodded. Her knitting needles kept flying. "Tom Ed will be ready to settle down, now. And so will John."

"John? You mean Blackjack?"

"Yes. The reason I let John make the payments on this place was because he needed some hard work to settle him down. Such a wild one! Drinking and gambling all the time. But he had to work so hard, meeting the payments, that he couldn't gamble or drink. And now he'll be out of the habit. Of course I've kept track. He owns about a half share in the Bar G, now. He and Tom Ed will be partners. Both of them have settled down. I guess it all worked out."

Blackjack shut the door gently and edged back into bed. He was awfully sleepy, and he let himself drift away. Nothing to do but get well. Everything else was all square.

Lobos of the

CHAPTER I

Grass Greed

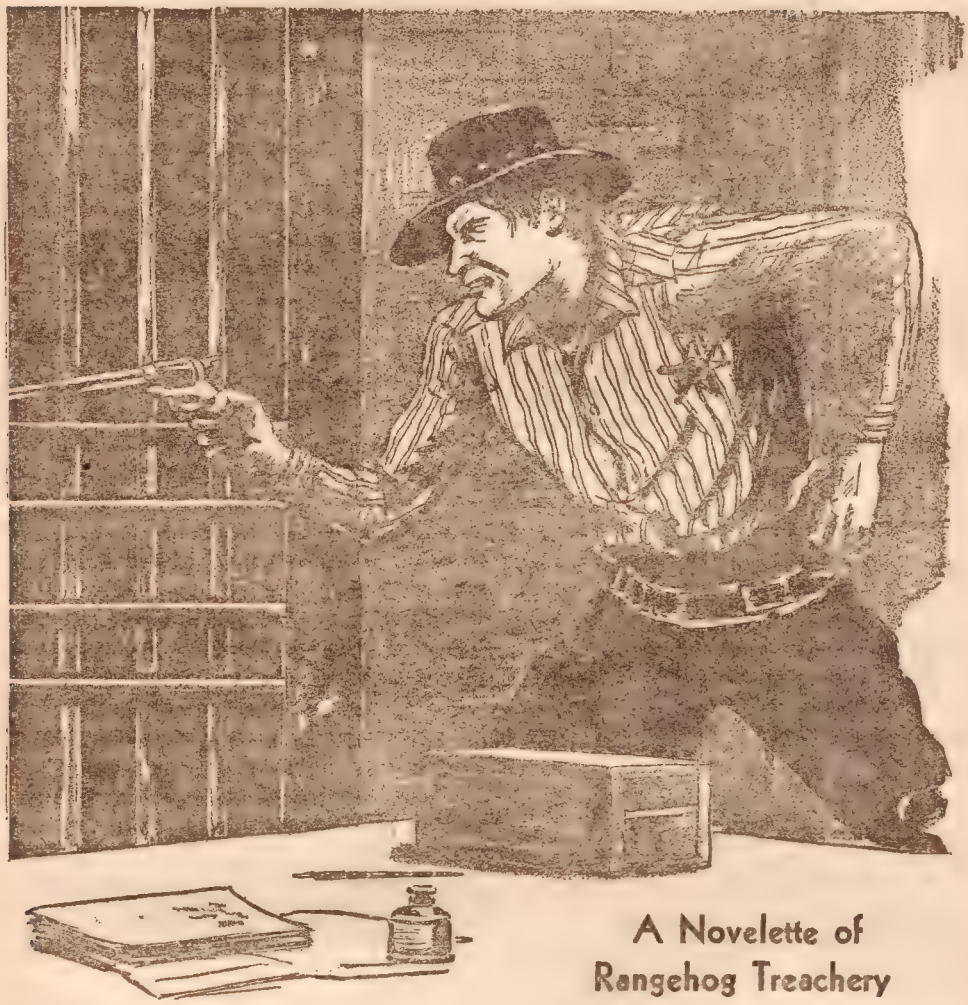
STEVE TRACY hesitated under the wide arch of Peck's livery barn, listening to the elements rage. The summer storm that had threatened through all the heat-filled hours of daylight was breaking at last. Great shocks of thunder rolled above the distant Luckimute Hills, and lightning guttered the night sky with its weirdly bluish tongue.

Rain blew against lighted windows, rattling them. It scudded fitfully along Boulder's wide street, to bring a sharp scent of damp dust into the air. Back in the stable, stalled horses blubbered nervously and thumped their hoofs on the wooden floor.

"It's coming," Steve Tracy muttered. "It's coming an' all hell can't

Luckimutes

By Victor Kaufman



A Novelette of Rangehog Treachery

Trigger turmoil had descended upon Boulder—a cattle town whose cow-country traditions had no place for sheepherders. And when Steve Tracy led the cowmen to stamp out the grass greed in a condemned country, he fought a hidden menace—the drygulch lead of lurking lobos.

stop it." But he wasn't thinking of the wind or the lightning or the thunder; his mind was on another, different kind of storm—a storm that would be unleashed by men and not by nature. Tracy glanced up as a long peal

of sound seemed to split the sky apart. He laughed with flat grimness.

"Roll, damn you—roll! You're a piker compared to what's ahead!"

That was true; the certain knowledge of it pulled Tracy from his thoughtful pose and sent him along the loose board walk at a rolling stride. He reached the flap doors of Mike Bulger's Saloon, went through them without slackening pace.

Only three men stood at the bar. Five or six more circled the faro layout in the far corner, and smoke from their cigarettes rippled around the ceiling lamps. Steve Tracy paused just inside the door—a big man and a rugged one, with shoulders that strained against his coat. There was something very direct, unwavering, in the way his blue-gray eyes examined the room.

One of the punchers at the bar turned; he saw Tracy and said: "They're upstairs a-waitin' for you." Steve Tracy just nodded. He crossed to a flight of rickety stairs, his long spurs dragging the floor. At the top of the steps Tracy turned into a dark hall and opened the first door on his left. Two men sat in the dimly lighted room beyond; the table between them held a box of cigars, four glasses and a bottle. Tracy peeled off his wide-brimmed hat, sailed it into a dark corner.

"Where's the kid?"

The older of the two seated men—Lafe Judd, who owned the Diamond-J outfit up by Indian Springs—glanced at Tracy from one side of his veiled eyes. Judd's whiskery face cracked in a tight smile. "Yore protégé ain't showed up."

Tracy shrugged. "Well, we won't wait. I can see Billy any time." He kicked up a chair and sat down. Lafe Judd took a cigar from the box, chewed at one end and made elaborate preparations for smoking it. Fred Rickerson of the Box-R spread—a plump, red-cheeked man with blandly humorous eyes—toyed at his half-empty glass of whisky. Both seemed to wait for Tracy to start the talk going. And Tracy did, without ceremony.

"Reckon you boys know why I wanted you to meet here."

Lafe Judd grunted; his heavy voice held the hint of boredom. "Yeah. Yuh been countin' sheep again."

STEVE TRACY gave Judd a hard stare. "I've had my riders scouting the Lost Meadow country for the past week. Ruttner's moved his sheep right up to the base of the Luckimutes. What's more, he's hired a bunch of new men lately—an' they sure as hell ain't sheepherders!"

Fred Rickerson said: "Aw hell, Tracy! You're too damned spooky on this here sheep question."

"Yeah," Judd grumbled. "An' I, for one, am gettin' tired of it. What'n hell? Hugo Ruttner ain't gonna try anything foolish. He's got better sense. I don't see why we have t'waste our time—"

"Now you listen to me!" Tracy leaned forward, leveling a stiff forefinger under Lafe Judd's nose. "Ruttner's got to have more grass. Either he gets it or he cuts down his herds. That's the sum of the proposition. An' there ain't no grass around for him to take except on the Wind River ranges—mine an' yours. I'm telling you Ruttner'll make a move to crowd in on us before the week's out. If you boys can't see that you're blinder than day-old pups!"

Resentment colored Judd's bearded face. "Why damn yore hide! Are yuh tryin' to tell *me* my way around? I was ranchin' in this valley when yuh was hangin' on yore mammy's skirts!"

"Hell, yes—" Fred Rickerson turned to frown at Tracy. "Judd an' me oughta know a thing'r two. There's been sheep on the other side of the Luckimutes before. But we've never had trouble—not since we run out the Carrick boys." Rickerson's broad face spread in an amiable grin. "That was when you was still in diapers, Tracy."

Spots of white tinged Tracy's lean cheeks. He put both hands against the table and sat very straight in his chair. "I may not have one foot in the grave—but, by hell, I've cut my eyeteeth. You know it, too." He paused a moment, lips flattened. "Sure you've had sheep around before, but they ain't been Ruttner's sheep. Lord! Ain't you boys heard of Hugo Ruttner? What'd he do up in Willow Basin? He run out four outfits as big as ours an' put his woolies on their land! What Ruttner wants, he goes about getting—an' he's got the money to play a damned high-handed game."

Storm beat against the window; stray fingers of wind seeped through the loose casing and made the ceiling-lamp splutter. Judd glanced up as a flash of lightning threw a glare into the room.

"No use crossin' bridges that ain't even been built. Hell! I got other things to think about. It may be rainin' now, but in a week the dry season'll start. I gotta begin shiftin' cattle an'—"

"Sure," Tracy interrupted coldly. "I've got other things I'd rather think about, myself. But I happen to be the man Ruttner'll hit first. My range runs along the Luckimutes. He'll crowd me—an' if he puts me out of the way, you an' Rickerson will be next. Good Lord, man! I'm only asking one thing. Wake up an' help me stop him before he starts!"

"Bah!"

Irritation ruffled Tracy's words. "A lot of sweat an' toil went into the making of Pitchfork. Dad slaved like hell for years. He fought Indians an' drought an' blizzard. Well—he left the place to me, an' by Godfrey, I ain't letting any damned sheepman steal it!"

FRED RICKERSON grinned; he spoke like a man trying to reason with a headstrong child. "Now, Tracy. We got nothin' to worry about. I ain't sayin' Hugo Ruttner wouldn't like to have our grass. But I do say he don't want it bad enough to risk a war. Hell's fire, man! A gent like Ruttner ain't hankerin' to get himself killed just for—"

"Men die for grass," Tracy broke in, speaking slowly. "You know that, Rickerson. In this country grass is almighty. Men have died to get it before, an' they will again."

"Bah!" Lafe Judd ripped the cigar from his teeth, scattering ashes across the table-top. "All this palaver about sheep an' grass don't amount to a damn! Tracy, we've listened to yuh moan about sheep for a month, now. What's happened? Not one damned thing!" He paused, glanced hard at Fred Rickerson, then back to Tracy.

He spoke in a tone more even, more direct. "If yuh really want somethin' to worry about, I'll give yuh plenty. I'm losin' stock hand over fist. So's Fred, here. We got enough trouble right at home without lookin' across the Luckimutes for more!"

"Sure," Tracy snapped. "An' so have I been losin' stock. Ruttner's behind that, too. He—"

"Oh, hell!" Judd sighed disgustedly. "Yo'll be blamin' him for the weather next! Ruttner behind the rustlin'? Bah!"

"Why not?" Tracy demanded. "He'd want to weaken us as much as he could—an' he'd want to keep us from thinking about sheep. No better way to do that than to rustle our beef!"

Judd stared at the window again, watching little rivulets of water run down the outside. He said softly. "That ain't what *I* think, Tracy."

Steve Tracy's lips flattened. The spots of white came back to stain his tanned cheeks once more.

"Just what," he asked, "are you driving at, Judd?"

Rickerson stirred nervously in his chair. Judd continued to watch the window, his dark eyes hard and stubborn. Tracy studied them both for a moment's strained silence.

"If you boys had listened to me last election time, maybe there wouldn't

be any trouble with rustlers. If we'd put in a sheriff who was worth—"

Judd whipped around angrily. "Bert Spackman's all right! If you'd quit worryin' about *him* bein' crooked an' take a good look at someone else I could name, maybe this range would be—"

"Wait a minute!' Tight lines appeared at the edges of Steve Tracy's mouth. "Don't say nothing you'll regret, Judd!"

"I ain't, by hell!" Lafe Judd bawled out. His beefy fist rocked the table. "I'm sayin' just what I think. Young Billy Drost'll bear watchin'! I don't give a damn whether he's yore friend or not. I got a right to my own opinions—an' one of 'em happens to be that Billy ain't on the level!"

Tracy heaved back his chair, snapped to his feet. He braced both palms on the table and leaned forward; the solid line of his fighter's jaw thrust out. "Take that back, Judd!"

The rancher stiffened, glared. "Damned if I will!"

"Take it back!"

Fred Rickerson said: "Aw, hell, Tracy—"

"I'm waiting, Judd," Tracy muttered.

Judd clenched his fists, then relaxed. "All right—all right. Forget it."

"I'll try. It may be hard to forget, but I'll try."

Rickerson cleared his throat softly. "Tracy, you sure do beat all. Sometimes you almost seem to have good sense, an' then again you come up with a real loco idea. If you wasn't so blind where that kid was concerned—"

"You shut up, too," Tracy warned, tone cold. "I'll not listen to any more of that talk. Not from anyone. Do I make myself clear to you, gentlemen?"

"Aw, hell," Rickerson sighed. "Let's quit jawin' about it. Sit down, Tracy. Have a drink."

But Steve Tracy shook his head. "Thank you, no. If I can't make you fools see what's ahead I reckon I might as well leave." He walked to the corner, picked up his hat, and paused with one hand on the doorknob. The dull smoke of anger was still in his eyes. "An' remember—I'm not expecting to hear any more crazy talk about Billy Drost. Understand?"

Neither of the men said a word. Tracy gave them a long, frosty glance. Then he went out, and the door slammed hard.

TWO riders had met at a spot where Stinking Water Creek was forded by a narrow canyon road—two fugitive figures in the storm-filled night. Hugo Ruttner, big-bodied and bulky, was speaking to young Billy Drost.

"Ready for the next raid, kid?"

"Any time yore boys are."

"Good. I'll have the crew at Luckimute Pass tonight— about two o'clock, say."

Billy Drost nodded. "That'll do."

A soft chuckle came from Ruttner's lips; he tipped his boxlike head to one side and studied the younger man's face.

"You're doing all right for yourself, kid. The profits from that rustling are all yours. I'm only after grass. When this fracas is over you'll be a rich man—an' you won't have to thank Steve Tracy for it, either!"

Lightning flickered. Billy Drost pulled his slicker tight around his throat. "That'll suit me."

Ruttner laughed; his nasal voice cut through the echoes of rolling thunder. "It'll be worth while, eh—not having to thank Tracy for what you've got."

"Damn yuh, Ruttner!" Billy's lips drew back; a smoldering hatred thickened his words. "Do yuh hafta keep remindin' me? Don't I hear that enough? Hell a-blazin'! I get so damned sick of listening to how much I owe that thick-headed tramp. 'Tracy did this for yuh, Billy—an' Tracy did

that for yuh. Ain't he a fine man, Billy?' Bah! To hell with Tracy!"

"Sure," Ruttner said, tone purring. "I know how you feel, kid. Why, even your girl was really given you by—"

"Shut up!"

Hugo Ruttner laughed softly, then they were silent. Storm tore at the higher canyon walls. Rain slithered against willow and sage; thunder echoed remotely. The horses pawed at the creek and buried their snouts in the water, sucking up a drink. Billy Drost hunched his thin shoulders with an angry twist.

"Well—anythin' else, Ruttner? I gotta show up at that meetin' before long."

The big man waved his hand. "Just let me know if those damned cow-nurses have anything up their sleeves. An' don't forget that we're lifting a few head of Lafe Judd's cattle tonight."

"I won't forget," Billy Drost said harshly. "Yuh bet I won't!" He wheeled his horse away, and Ruttner watched him go. When the last faint echo of those departing hoofs died in the storm, the sheepman reined around. He splashed across the creek and his nasal voice called: "All right, Bert. He's gone."

Another rider shoved from the thick willows—a tall, rail-thin man astride a rangy black. He paused to roll a smoke. Matchlight flared in his fingers and the glow flickered against a wrinkled, weather-seamed face—against a five-pointed star on the man's vest. He pulled once at his cigarette.

"All set?"

"All set," Ruttner twanged. "You know what to do."

Sheriff Bert Spackman jerked his head. "Yeah." After a moment he added: "Queer kid."

"Billy?" Hugo Ruttner laughed. "Sure he's a queer kid. There's a funny twist in his brain, Bert, an' that's why I picked him for this job. Billy Drost owes every damned thing he has to Steve Tracy. But you think he appreciates it? Hell, no. He hates Tracy—hates him because he can't stand the thought of having to thank someone else for his luck."

"Yeah." Spackman's voice was rusty, as if the vocal chords were unaccustomed to work. He sucked at the cigarette. "Yore boys know what to do?"

Ruttner's head jerked. "Sure. They'll pull out an' leave Billy alone. Just give 'em a warning shot, Bert." The sheepman looked off into the rainy darkness, laughed softly. "By hell—if this thing works like I think, it'll tear that damned range apart!"

"Will at that."

Hugo Ruttner waved his right arm. "Get along, Bert—there's work to be done."

Sheriff Spackman nodded and the two of them rode off in opposite directions. Ruttner turned back toward his camp on the far side of the Luckimutes; Bert Spackman headed for town along the trail Billy Drost had taken.

CHAPTER II

Lurking Wolves

STEVE TRACY bumped through the saloon's batwing doors, a tide of resentful anger still strong within him. On the walk, he paused to twirl a cigarette in swift, expert fingers.

"The fools!" Tracy muttered. "The damned, crazy fools! I can't see where in hell they get their ideas about Billy."

The kid was funny sometimes, of course. Tracy admitted that. But he wasn't dishonest; no one with a father like old Cab Drost could possibly do anything that was downright wrong. Tracy remembered Cab Drost now—a big, hearty man who had ramrodded the Pitchfork spread in the old days when John Tracy was still alive.

An outlaw horse had taken the measure of Cab Drost years ago, leaving young Billy an orphan. He'd almost become a part of the Tracy family after that; five years younger than

Steve, Billy Drost had been his playmate in boyhood. Later, when Steve Tracy's own father died and Steve stepped in to run Pitchfork himself, Billy went onto the payroll as a top-hand.

Just a year ago, now, Steve Tracy had deeded over a section of Pitchfork land and set Billy up in the cow business for himself. He could still remember how Billy acted that day—how Billy choked and seemed unable to talk. Some folks might have thought Billy was mad, angered beyond words. But Steve Tracy held a different opinion; the kid had merely been overcome with gratitude—so damned appreciative that speech was impossible.

"A good kid," Tracy thought, stubborn on the subject. "A plenty good kid, no matter what anyone says!"

He pulled at his smoke and scowled into the street. Rain still pelted Boulder, but it was lessening now. The town itself seemed asleep. One or two lights glimmered from shop windows, laying a shiny yellow pattern across the rain-beaten mud. Off in the darkness a dog barked fitfully and in the nearby stable a horse whinnied with nervous impatience.

Tracy finished up his cigarette, flicked it away and watched it die in a puddle before him. He started to turn up the walk, paused suddenly as a horse cut into the far end of the street. Hoofs slushed along through the mud; the animal was blowing after a hard run. Tracy squinted at the rider—and recognized the slender shape of Billy Drost.

"Hi, kid!"

Billy called: "That yuh, Tracy?" He halted before the saloon, dismounted and looped his reins to the rail. His voice was easy, without strain. "Sorry I'm late. Busted a saddle cinch an' hadta fix it. Yuh about ready for that meetin'?"

Tracy shook his head. "It's all over, kid."

"Oh!" Billy frowned through the gloom. "What happened?"

"Nothing much. Judd an' Rickerson still won't admit that there's any danger from the sheep. Lord, those two gents are bull-headed!"

"Yuh ain't planned nothin', then?" Billy asked in a casual tone.

"Not yet, kid. I'll just have to wait—an' then fight Ruttner alone, unless Judd an' Rickerson wake up."

Billy stepped onto the walk. "I'm with yuh, Steve. Yuh know that. Anythin' I can do—"

"Sure!" A grin pulled Tracy's face into a mass of fine wrinkles. "I'm counting on you, kid. It's a relief to find one man in this condemned country who's got a little sense." Then he was instantly sober again. "Billy—you been missin' any stock?"

The younger man looked out into the street, lowering his glance. "Well—I kinda figger I'm missin' some. Can't tell for shore, but—"

"Just thought I'd warn you," Tracy broke in. "The rest of us have been hit pretty hard."

"Yeah?" Billy's shadowed eyes came up.

Tracy nodded soberly. "That's one thing that makes Judd an' Rickerson hard to argue with. They're so hepped about the rustlin' that they couldn't see a sheep ten feet off!"

Billy asked quickly: "What's their idea?"

"Well—" Tracy hesitated. "They ain't sure. But I'm thinking Hugo Ruttner's behind it all. We never had any stealing to speak of until Ruttner moved up against the Luckimutes."

"Uh-huh, yo're probably right." Then Billy changed the subject. "What yuh doin' now?"

A grin touched Tracy's lips again. "How about a cup of coffee? You'll be wanting to see Helen anyhow, before you leave."

"Yeah." The faintest note of strain touched Billy's voice. "Shore."

THEY walked together up the street and turned in at a small lighted building—the Boulder Café. Tracy stood back to let Billy Drost

enter first, thus failing to catch the flash of resentment that twisted the youth's features. When Tracy stepped into the place a moment later, Billy was grinning at a girl behind the neat, well-kept counter.

"Howdy, Helen." Billy's manner was almost charming now. "Here's yore good customers again."

Helen Lambert smiled a quick, lively smile that brightened every soft line of her dark cheeks. Rather tall for a young girl, she seemed to dominate the place; each ray of lamplight appeared to shine for her benefit alone. Wavy brown hair framed an evenly featured face that was as smooth and thoughtful as her voice.

"Oh—hello, Billy." Then her eyes fell upon Tracy; they began to shine visibly and her words were a trifle breathless. "Well, Steve! You—you're quite a stranger. It's been a week since you were here last."

Tracy grinned. "Just a busy man, that's all." He climbed onto a counter stool. "Two cups of coffee, Helen."

Billy Drost scowled. "I'm buyin' yore drink, Tracy."

"No, you ain't," Tracy corrected. "Save your money."

Pressure thinned the kid's mouth. "Can't I ever do anythin' for myself?"

"Sure, sure. But save your cash, kid. You'll need it. When a man gets married—"

The girl turned quickly away, disappearing through the kitchen door. Billy Drost looked down at his hands and ground his teeth together. Steve Tracy grinned; he brought forth makings and shaped up a smoke. After a moment, Helen came back. She placed a steaming cup before each of them, added a huge pitcher of cream.

"That's real cow's cream," she said lightly. "None of this canned milk. Old Man Marks, down by the gap, has a cow—and he's one rancher I know who isn't afraid to milk!"

Tracy chuckled. "He ain't a rancher, Helen. He's a dirt farmer. Lots of difference." But Steve Tracy was really thinking of other things; he was remembering how Helen Lambert had changed life for him—and for Billy Drost.

Six years ago she'd arrived in Boulder with her ailing father. Together they opened this restaurant, then when George Lambert died, Helen had carried on, making her own way in a country that often discouraged men. She was that way—full of boundless energy and continual good nature. At first, Steve Tracy had let himself build up a foolish dream about Helen Lambert, a dream that even now came back when he was near her.

But she had seemed to choose Billy Drost. So Tracy stepped aside, quite satisfied to have it that way. Billy needed someone like Helen Lambert; she would be good for him. And there was no doubt in Steve Tracy's mind that Billy loved the girl.

IT passed quickly through Steve's thoughts, that memory. Then he forced it away. He drank his coffee and dropped his cigarette into the little brown puddle that was left.

"I'll leave you kids alone," Tracy chuckled. "Got to get back to the ranch."

Billy looked up with open approval, but Helen Lambert's glance turned shadowy. She said: "You'd better wait until the rain stops, Steve."

He shook his head, grinning. "Almost stopped now. An' three's a crowd." Tracy winked at Billy Drost, drawled: "Don't stay up too late, kid. We may have things to do before long."

"I'll be ready," Billy muttered. He watched Tracy leave, then turned to Helen and started to speak. But he saw the girl's glance cling to the restaurant window and something in her eyes made Billy's cheeks harden.

"When yuh gonna stop that?" he asked roughly. "Good Lord, Helen! Tracy don't even know yuh exist. Why d'yuh keep a-moonin' after him all the time for, anyhow?"

She looked down; her hands smoothed the spotless white apron that pro-

tected her long, flowing dress. "I—I guess I can't help it, Billy."

A bitter flatness came into Billy's voice. "Yo'll hafta help it! Yo're too swell a girl to waste time thinkin' about someone who—"

Helen looked out the window again. A rider's high shape cut through the square of light in front of the restaurant—Steve Tracy's figure with one arm raised in farewell. Then Tracy vanished in the far darkness and Helen smiled, her eyes troubled. She seemed to be thinking aloud. "He's a fine man, Billy."

"Not fine enough for yuh!"

The girl gave Billy a sharp glance. "How can you say that? After all Steve Tracy's done for you, you could at least—"

"Don't say that!" Billy stiffened on the stool, eyes turned greenish in the lamplight. Anger flushed his long cheeks. "Do *yuh* hafta keep remindin' me o' that, too?"

Helen studied him thoughtfully, "It's true, isn't it?"

Billy swallowed hard. "Yeah, but—" Suddenly he raised off the stool, leaned across the counter and grabbed Helen's hand. "Good Lord, Helen! I love yuh—love yuh more'n Tracy ever could. How many times do I hafta say that? How long—"

She pulled gently away from him. "I'm sorry, Billy."

"Helen!" Then Billy Drost relaxed slowly, settling back onto the stool. A bright flicker burned in his eyes. "Yuh—yuh acted like yuh cared, once! What was that—just playin'?"

"I—I'm sorry about that, too." Helen Lambert lowered her dark lashes, bit her lip. "Really I am, Billy. I thought I *did* care, once. But—" She looked up. "Oh, Billy! Can't you see? Can't you understand? I like you, but—"

"Yeah! I see, all right!" He flung himself away from the counter and stood before the door, hands clenched. "It's Tracy, that's all! He's got a fine rib ranch an' more money than me. He's—"

"No, Billy. Not that."

"Shore! Yuh'd like to live at Pitchfork, with a Chink cook t'work for yuh an' blooded horses t'ride! My little shack ain't good enough." Billy choked; his lips were gray. "Well—mebbe I'll have them things, too. Mebbe some day yuh'll be glad enough to take me."

"Billy!"

But rage held Billy Drost in its throttling grip; it wheeled him around and onto the walk outside. The door slammed.

SHERIFF BERT SPACKMAN rode into town just as Tracy left the café; Spackman pulled into a shadow and waited until he left Boulder at a full gallop. Then Spackman took his own horse to the stables. Coming out, he paused in the gloom and curled a cigarette, hatred twinging his taciturn cheeks. Bert Spackman had no greater love for Tracy than Tracy had for him. Steve Tracy had openly opposed him in the last election and Spackman couldn't forget.

Standing there now, with the last few drops of rain beating his damp clothing, Bert Spackman's mind relentlessly rehearsed the plan that would ruin the man he hated. After a while, Billy Drost came flinging out of the café. He walked past Spackman without seeing him and strode blindly up to his horse in front of Mike Bulger's. The sheriff watched, slightly smiling. And when Billy Drost thundered away at an empty lope, Spackman approached the saloon.

Inside, he found Lafe Judd playing a tedious game of poker with Rickerson. Spackman walked to their table, sat down. Judd glanced up and grinned ruefully.

"Hello, sheriff. Bad night. I'm losin' every hand."

Fred Rickerson's bland manner permitted a faint smile of greeting. Bert Spackman just nodded. He glanced furtively around the room, then looked straight at Lafe Judd. "Losin' more'n money, ain't yuh?"

Lafe Judd folded his cards, dropped them. He gave Spackman a hard stare. "Yuh know damn' well I am! An' yuh know I'd like some action on yore part. This rustlin' is—"

"Ready for action," Spackman broke in.

Judd straightened, eyes narrowing. Fred Rickerson scowled his puzzlement. Spackman remained quite calm; never a man to waste words, he just waited.

"So?" Judd muttered at last. "Well, let's have it!"

Spackman ducked his head. "Need help. Yuh boys back me?"

"Hell, yes!"

But Rickerson was more cautious. "We'd better get Tracy. He'd want to be in on—"

"No," Spackman said.

The two ranchers stared at him. Spackman shrugged. "My idea. May be wrong."

"Look here!" Judd growled. "Yuh mean Steve Tracy—"

"Ain't shore 'bout Tracy," Spackman explained. "Friend o' his, yes."

Judd slowly stiffened; his beard seemed to bristle. "The kid?"

Spackman just nodded. Judd's fist rapped the table. "I figgered it! By hell—I figgered it!" He looked sharply at the sheriff. "Where'd yuh run onto this?"

"My job. Been snoopin' some. Ain't sure. Just playin' a hunch."

"A good one, too!" Judd snapped. "An' Tracy—"

"No," Richardson interrupted. "Not Tracy. He's blind as a bat where that kid's concerned—but he ain't crooked."

"No man," Lafe Judd grumbled, "can be *that* blind!"

Rickerson shook his head. "Steve Tracy has spent so much time helpin' Billy Drost that he's plumb forgot to inquire whether the kid's worth it. Tracy's so damned straight himself that he don't expect crookedness from his friends."

"Bah!" Judd snorted. "I know yuh like Tracy. So did I—once! But it's beginnin' to look like—"

"Aw hell," Rickerson said. "Tracy's just bein' fooled. It's funny, too. He generally figgers things right. But that kid's a good actor, Lafe. When he's around Tracy I almost like him myself!"

But Judd clung stubbornly to his thought. "It's beginnin' to look like there's more'n that, Fred. All Tracy can talk is 'sheep—sheep'! Why? To keep us from lookin' at the rustlin' too close, that's why!"

Spackman cleared his throat. "Sheep don't matter."

"There!" Judd exploded. "Another man with sense!"

"My idea," Spackman amended. "May be wrong."

"Yuh ain't!"

Fred Rickerson stirred nervously. "Well, what're we goin' to do?"

The sheriff leaned forward. "Bring some men. Meet me at Fetterman's old place. 'Bout two o'clock, say."

"We will!" Judd snapped, rising. "Come on, Fred."

Spackman slouched in his chair, watching them depart. After a long moment he went over to the bar and took a drink—then left the saloon, faintly smiling.

CHAPTER III

Hell-Sent Gunfire

STEVE TRACY was drinking his second cup of breakfast coffee when a rider galloped madly along the road that led past the Pitchfork horse corrals. Tracy glanced up, scowling. Old Heck Milgren, string-bodied foreman of the ranch, straightened in his chair and squinted through a dusty window.

"It's Jack Manners," Milgren said. "An' he's ridin' that hoss like it was twins!"

"Manners?" Tracy jumped to his feet, lips gone grim. "He's the man I

had scouting the south pass. Maybe Ruttner's started to move in!"

Heck Milgren grumbled. "Just like a lousy sheepman to start somethin' now—when I ain't even finished my coffee!"

Tracy kicked the chair aside, stepped through the door. Halted on the porch, he waited for the rider to come up. Heck Milgren crowded Tracy's heels, cursing glumly. Jack Manners—a chunky man and a quick one—was out of the saddle even before his horse stopped.

"Hell's poppin' in town," Manners announced. "Hot damn!"

"What's up?"

Manners scratched his chin. "Plenty, boss. It's this way. I got through scoutin' that south pass like yuh said. Come back through Boulder an' stopped for a drink. Mike Bulger give me all the news. He didn't know much, but what he did know was—"

"Never mind the trimmings!" Tracy snapped impatiently. "What happened?"

"I'm comin' to that," Manners explained, unruffled. A man who liked to talk, he never failed to extract every possible word from any situation. "Bulger heard it from somebody. Don't know who. But anyway—" the puncher paused.

"Yes?"

"Well—" Again Manners hesitated. He looked hard at Tracy. "Yuh ain't gonna like this, boss."

"Damn it—what's up?"

Jack Manners drew a long breath. "Well, Billy Drost's in jail!"

Tracy stared. "What?"

"He's in jail," Manners repeated. "Billy Drost. The kid. He's locked up."

"Jail? Billy in jail?" White spots began to show on Tracy's cheeks. "Hell's fire! Why?"

"Rustlin'," Manners drawled.

Steve Tracy stood very still for a moment; his lips were hard, his eyes bleak. "Well," he asked finally, "what's the rest of it?"

The puncher shrugged. "Dunno. That's all I heard."

"It'd be Judd," Tracy muttered. "It'd be Judd behind it." He snapped another question at Jack Manners. "How about Ruttner? What's he up to?"

"Well," Manners drawled, "it's this way. He's got the same bunch o' hard cases camped down by Willow Creek —'bout twenty-five or thirty, I'd say. Sheep're a little closer to the mountains. Not much."

Tracy stood still a moment, deep in thought. "Ruttner's got to make a move soon. He can't keep feeding those gunslicks for long."

Heck Milgren nodded glumly. "Yeah. Damn the fool ranchers around here! If they'd only—"

"They won't," Tracy said. "They'll sit around feeling safe until Ruttner makes his play—an' then it may be too late." His tone hardened. "Damn Lafe Judd! He not only refuses to help, but he gets a wild-hare idea about Billy being a thief—an' has the kid locked up! That cuts me out of that much more support. Billy's about the only one in the valley I can depend on."

Milgren's "Yeah" was faintly doubtful. Steve Tracy's gaze swung to the nearby Luckimute Hills, great rolling buttes hazed over by the fresh morning sun. His lips flattened. "I'm going to town, Heck. You an' the boys can watch things."

The foreman looked disturbed. "Think yuh oughta?"

Tracy shrugged. "Ruttner won't make a move in daylight. His kind work best at night. Anyhow, I won't be gone long."

"No. What I meant was—" Milgren hesitated, cleared his throat. "Well, are yuh shore Billy's so damned important right now?"

"He's my friend," Tracy murmured. "An' he's in trouble. I'd say that was pretty important, Heck."

"Well, just be damned shore he's worth helpin' before—"

Tracy's words slapped the foreman. "What d'you mean, Heck?"

Milgren's glance went blank. "Nothin'. I just thought mebbe—"

"Stop thinking along those lines!" Tracy snapped, and squared off toward the corral.

Heck Milgren and Jack Manners watched him go. Manners muttered: "It shore beats all how Tracy goes for that kid. Why hell! I wouldn't be a bit surprised—"

The foreman sighed. "I shore hope Billy ain't guilty," he said. "I shore hope so—for *his* sake."

BOULDER lay somnolent under the morning sun when Steve Tracy cantered into the short street. The mud from last night's rain was almost gone now, and dust began to stir in the breeze. A buckboard stood before the general store and two saddled horses stomped at the court house railing farther down—but no human appeared on the walks.

Then, abruptly, a man appeared. He came from the wide door of Peck's livery stable; he saw Tracy, stared a moment, and went hurriedly toward the Boulder Hotel, just across from Mike Bulger's place.

"One of Judd's men," Tracy muttered. "Looks like I figgered this right. Judd must be—"

"Steve!"

The voice of Helen Lambert pulled his gaze around. She stood on the walk before her restaurant—a stately, supple figure with sunlight dancing in her hair. Steve Tracy forced a grin.

"Howdy, Helen. Nice morn—"

"Steve!" The girl came swiftly from the walk, long skirts aswish. She gripped the hitchrail with both hands and leaned forward. Dark trouble shaded her eyes. "They've got Billy in jail. He—"

"I know," Tracy drawled. "That's why I'm in town. Don't worry about it, girl."

She looked steadily at him. "Do you think—"

But Steve Tracy's attention settled upon three figures who came onto the porch of the Boulder Hotel. One was the puncher who had entered the place a few moments ago; the others were Lafe Judd and Fred Rickerson.

Tracy's lips flattened. He said: "Don't worry, Helen," then kicked his horse ahead.

Lafe Judd waited stiffly on the hotel steps; his beefy hands were tucked into a cinched-up belt and his eyes were hard. Fred Rickerson's usually bland face carried a scowl. The puncher remained in the background, smoking.

Tracy paused before them, swung to the ground and looped his reins to the hitch-post. Judd's beard seemed to bristle.

"Well, reckon yo've heard."

"I have." Tracy's quiet voice didn't soften the sense of strain that flicked from his eyes. "I have, Judd. This some of your work?"

"I helped catch 'im, if that's what yuh mean!"

Tracy thumbed back his sombrero.

"Where's the kid?"

"Where'n hell d'yuh reckon? In jail, where he belongs!"

"Thanks." Tracy's head jerked in a slight nod. He heeled around and started for the courthouse. Over across the street, six more men drifted from Peck's stable—more of Judd's men and a few from Rickerson's outfit.

Lafe Judd yelled: "What yuh gonna do, Tracy?"

Tracy didn't answer. He mounted the courthouse steps and walked into a short hall. Sheriff Spackman's office was in front, with the jail flanking it. Spackman sat stiffly upright before a battered roll-top desk, his back to a barred cell door and his eyes on the entrance through which Tracy stepped.

"Well?"

There was a flat ring to Tracy's voice. "Where's the kid?"

"That any o' yore concern?"

"I think—" And then Tracy's words were halted by a scuffing sound from the cell. Billy Drost, unshaven and

unkempt, appeared at the grill. His hands gripped the bars.

"Steve!"

"Hello, kid."

Billy's voice was high-pitched, drawn to a breaking point. "Yuh don't believe 'em, Tracy? They're framin' me! They—"

FEET thumped along the hall outside. Lafe Judd thrust himself into the room, closely followed by Rickerson's thick form. And from the corner of his glance, Tracy saw their men lining the yonder steps.

Judd snapped: "Don't be a fool, Tracy!"

But Steve Tracy looked back to Billy. "What's your story, kid?"

Billy Drost shoved frantic words from his gray lips. "I—I was goin' home, see, an' I run onto the trail of a bunch of riders. Follered along an' seen 'em roundin' up a herd of Lafe Judd's cows. That—that's gospel, Steve. Well, I was a-sittin' there, wonderin' just what to do, when Spackman an' the rest busted down on me. Some one shot. Them rustlers faded quick an' these fools brought me in, sayin' I—"

"Bah!" Judd rapped out. "We caught 'im red-handed, right with the herd!"

"That's a lie!" Billy yelled.

Tracy glanced at Judd. "Where's the others? You get any of them?"

The rancher wagged his head. "They faded, all right. We never even got close."

"So? It fits Billy's story, don't it?"

"I don't give a damn whether it fits or not!" Judd flared. "Billy's in jail an' he's gonna stay."

Steve Tracy gave Spackman a hard stare. "Open the cell, sheriff."

"No," Spackman said.

"Open it!"

Lafe Judd wheeled himself in between Tracy and Spackman; his features quivered. "He ain't openin' any doors! By hell, Tracy—yo're puttin' yoreself in a damned bad spot. Billy's a cow-thief. An' any man who sides a cow-thief ain't nothin' but a—"

"Careful, Judd," Tracy warned flatly.

"Well, what else can a man think?"

"You fool, Judd." Tracy took a step forward, stood there with legs braced. "You fool. Ruttner's behind that stealing. An' you, with your crazy ideas, are playing right into his hand. I'd say this was just about what he hoped for—to throw the ranchers at each other's throats an' name-calling. An' if we get to fighting between ourselves, Ruttner will—"

"Ruttner!" Judd bawled. "Ruttner! I get so damned tired of hearin' yuh moan about Ruttner an' his sheep! There's other things—"

Tracy sighed. He faced Spackman. "You opening that cell, or am I?"

"Neither," Spackman retorted. "Neither."

Fred Rickerson, silent up to now, stepped forward. He put a hand on Tracy's arm. "Aw hell, Steve. Open them eyes o' yours just once an'—"

"For the last time," Tracy snapped. *"Open that cell!"*

Sheriff Bert Spackman went visibly tense, his hand began to crawl toward the .45 on his hip. "Get out, Tracy," he ordered hollowly. "Get out!"

Rage began to batter Tracy's rigid calm; it swelled in his throat and blurred his glance. Words came softly from those straight lips of his. "You care to use that gun, sheriff?"

Spackman's narrowed eyes flicked over to Judd. He seemed uncertain. "You boys backin' me?"

"Hell yes!" Judd exploded. "Tracy—make a move an' I'll blow you to hell!"

"Fool," Tracy said coldly. "That's what Spackman wants—to see us fight each other. You're blind, Judd! This tail-dragging sheriff of yours is just one of Ruttner's hired dogs. If you had eyes in that thick head of yours—"

Spackman said thinly: "Now yuh be careful!"

Tracy took a step forward, stare pinned on Spackman's leering face. He took two steps. "Well—"

A shrill yell burst into that drawn tension. A yell that came from the yonder street—a yell weighted with all the sharpness of urgency and terror.

"Tracy! Where's Tracy!"

Bert Spackman didn't move; but a bright gleam of satisfaction touched his narrowed eyes. Judd backed away, scowling. Fred Rickerson wheeled to face the outer door—and on the steps the punchers began a jumbled talk.

The voice yelled again: "Tracy! Where's Tracy?"

Jack Manners' voice! Tracy recognized it and a rush of apprehension tore through his rugged frame.

"Here!" Tracy roared. "Here—inside!"

Hoofs drummed up to the courthouse steps. Boots rapped on wood and came scuffing along the hall. One of Judd's men said: "Hell, he's been shot!" And then Jack Manners almost fell through the doorway. Blood stained his right shoulder. His shirt was torn and dusty; there was a mask of utter horror across his eyes.

"Tracy! We—we're wiped out! Ruttner's crew come down an' smashed us all to hell. Heck Milgren's a-lyin' out there dead an' Pitchfork's goin' up in smoke!"

CHAPTER IV

Tophand Traitor

DEAD silence held the room for an instant. Jack Manners swayed on his feet, put one arm against the wall to steady himself. Sheriff Spackman didn't move. Fred Rickerson ripped out an anguished oath—and Lafe Judd's face went from crimson to chalky gray.

Manners pulled a hand across his eyes, almost groaned.

"Damn it—don't yuh hear? Ruttner's moved into the valley! He smashed Pitchfork an' he's a-headin' for Judd's an' Rickerson's. He—"

Lafe Judd swore in a high voice. "Ruttner? He's—"

"He tricked us all," Tracy muttered—and felt an actual weight run through his body. "You see, Judd? He caught us scattered. You an' Rickerson have half your crews in town. When Ruttner hits your place—"

But Judd had already seen that. He charged past Tracy and lunged into the hall, shouting: "Saddle—saddle, damn yuh all! Rickerson! Come on! There may be time—"

Rickerson choked out an oath, followed like a man just roused from sleep. Confusion rose along Boulder's thoroughfare. Men yelled back and forth; horses blubbered nervously. In some near building a voice called: "What's up? What's up?"

Tracy wheeled to Manners. "Jack, you able to ride?" He caught the puncher's jerky nod, went on: "Get out with 'em, then! They'll need help—all they can get!"

Manners, groggy on his feet, stumbled into the hall. Steve Tracy faced Spackman. The sheriff stood rigid against the far window, narrowly watching all this. He didn't speak; he didn't move.

Tracy rapped: "Where's your key?"

Spackman shrugged. "Reckon yuh win. Keys're on the desk."

Over in the cell, Billy Drost kept wailing: "Get me outa here! Steve, get me out!"

Tracy stepped to the desk, fumbled through a stack of papers. He found the key ring and turned toward the cell door. Billy Drost gripped the bars, rattling them impatiently; there was no color on Billy's face. Steve Tracy started to thrust the key into the lock. And then, quite suddenly, he was conscious of two things: fear on the face of Billy Drost and a rush of breath from Spackman, standing behind.

"Down, Billy!"

Tracy yelled the two words, pivoted, threw himself to one side. He un-

derstood what was coming, even before he saw Spackman's fist sweep up. Billy fell back, shouted a high meaningless phrase. Tracy, still spinning, forced all his weight forward onto his toes, and went for his gun.

Spackman's "Damn yuh!" merged with the snarl of his piece. Tracy felt a bullet sting his cheeks; it was close enough to burn a thin welt across the flesh. Spackman cried out again, steadied his aim for a second try. But Tracy had his own sights lined, and all the dogged force of his will went into the shot.

Steel bucked in Tracy's fist; the bitter stench of powder swirled back to fill his nostrils. Spackman screamed, staggered. His .45 spoke again, throwing its wild echo into the sound-jarred room. Lead squealed through a board at Tracy's feet. Then Spackman sprawled face-down across the floor —and never moved again.

"Billy!" Steve Tracy whipped around. He tossed the key ring through the bars. "Get yourself out, kid. Then ride like hell out t'your place. Maybe you can save some stuff before Ruttner gets there!"

Billy Drost yelled: "Steve!" But Tracy was already gone, through the hall and down the courthouse steps.

Outside, Boulder quivered in the throes of excitement. Men ran up and down the walk, confused with their talk. Mike Bulger shoved out of his saloon, shrieking: "It's the sheep—the sheep!" The buckboard before the general store went over on its side as the horses bucked against their halters, and dust rose thickly into the sunlight.

TRACY crossed the street in long, reaching jumps. Helen Lambert, poised white and fearful in her restaurant door, called to him: "Steve—Steve!" But he didn't hear. There was nothing in his ears except the memory of Jack Manners' words: "Heck Milgren's a-lyin' out there dead an' Pitchfork's goin' up in smoke!" The thought of it drove rage higher and higher into Steve's mind. He ripped the reins from the railing, made the saddle in one leap.

And then he was gone, pounding out of Boulder onto the sage flats beyond. The heat of a sun-filled day glazed the sky ahead; that same heat struck Tracy, seeming to add fresh fuel to his wrath. Once, looking to the west, he saw smoke billowing faintly against the sky—smoke that hung like a shroud above the spot where Pitchfork had been. Gone, Tracy thought, all gone. And yet it wasn't. Not yet. Not unless Ruttner swept the valley clean.

Still riding at a full run, Tracy's glance whipped a little to the south. Another column of smoke had begun to tinge the sky there; a small column, just starting.

"Judd's place," Tracy muttered, bleakness bearing across his cheeks. "Ruttner hit there, too, an' went on to Fred Rickerson's."

So thinking, Tracy shifted his course a little to the east. He dropped the reins, giving his horse a full running head, and used both hands to feed fresh shells into his gun. His mind was busy checking the odds. Judd and Rickerson had less than ten men with them. There might be a few others left from Judd's beaten crew, but that was doubtful.

Ruttner had started his campagin with about twenty-five. Allowing for a fair number of casualties, he would still outnumber the cowmen almost two to one. There were other men at Rickerson's ranch, of course. But Tracy left them out of his calculations; they were too far away to be of value, unless Ruttner succeeded in gaining Rickerson's headquarters before the cattle faction blocked his way.

Tracy's broad lips flattened; bitterness surged through him—bitterness at the greed which forced men to war for profits. It was nothing more than that, just war. War brought on by man's own lust for wealth and power. War that would be fought without

quarter, without mercy. The strongest would take the grass.

Land broke away before him, swooping down into rugged cut-bank canyons that eased off toward Wind River, three miles distant. Tracy bore to the left, slid into a gulch and mounted the far wall with spurs biting deep to reach the top at a rush. He went on, faster.

Then, quite abruptly, he heaved back on the reins and halted, his lean figure outlined against the sky in a stiff, attentive pose. Thin sounds came to him on the slack breeze—high, flat, flaying sounds. The angry echoes of gunfire up ahead!

"It's here," Tracy muttered, and felt his nerves grow taut. For just an instant, he hesitated. Then he let the reins out and sent his pony down a fan-shaped draw that ended on a long finger of table-land.

Riding toward the rimrock edge, he gradually caught sight of the scene below—a scene that he absorbed in one raking glance. A cluster of men was barricaded within the scattered upthrusts of a boulder patch; smoke from their guns made little puffs in the air and the shots threw waves of sound against the hills. Around and about, circling like Indians, was a full score of riders—all placing their shots with vicious directness.

Tracy caught the answer in a flash. Judd and Rickerson and their men had met Ruttner here—had tried to head him off. But the odds had been too great and the cowmen were now fighting a stand-off battle. A battle that they couldn't win, unless—unless—

"One thing to do," Tracy muttered grimly. "Just one!"

It went through his mind, that single futile plan. He realized the hopeless chances, forgot them. And then, without thinking further, Steve Tracy drove his horse forward. His right hand clawed the .45 from his holster; his nerves and muscles tightened. From now on, it was his battle.

BACK in the sheriff's office, Billy Drost let himself out of the cell and picked up Spackman's fallen gun. A cartridge belt with an empty holster hung from a wall-peg near the desk. Billy grabbed it. He paused momentarily as Steve Tracy's figure made a dusty streak across the window. He glanced down at Spackman's motionless figure, scowling—trying to place the man's part in all this. A doubtful expression crept onto Billy's hardened cheeks; he cursed in a way that was almost a groan.

"What'll I do?" He shook his head, like a man just roused from sleep. He turned and sluffed into the hall.

No one tried to stop him; no one seemed to notice him. Boulder was in chaos; a cattle town with all of cow-country tradition behind it, Boulder felt full well the menace that now threatened. Even the buildings appeared to frown, and some citizen's dog set up a prolonged howl.

Billy's horse was in front of the courthouse, alone with that of Spackman's. Billy stared at the animal. He lifted his eyes and looked out across the flats, where Steve Tracy's figure was fading swiftly into the heat haze. Billy Drost bit his lip. He pulled a shaking hand across his eyes.

"Oughta help—I oughta help him—"

He hesitated, mumbling the words over and over. He took one step toward his horse—and then his roving, troubled glance caught sight of Helen Lambert, farther down the street. She stood without motion, gripping the hitchrail, her eyes turned after Tracy's vanishing form.

All doubt vanished from Billy's eyes then; a sultry, burning took its place. He turned abruptly away from his horse. Tight-lipped, almost sullen of feature, he crossed the street and angled to Helen's side.

She saw him coming. She turned. "Billy! What are you doing *here,* when he—"

"Listen to me," Billy muttered. "I

—I'm askin' yuh to marry me, Helen. I'm asking yuh to come with me an' leave this damned country for good. There ain't nothin' left—not now. When Ruttner's through—"

"Billy!" Helen gasped.

He seemed to sense her thought. "It's yuh I'm thinkin' of, Helen! We gotta get out before—"

"You'd desert Steve Tracy," Helen said, no life in her words. "You'd desert the man who's given you everything you ever had—who—"

"Stop that!" Billy Drost went pale, dead pale. Only his eyes and lips seemed to live—the eyes glittering and the lips twitching under strain. He stared hard at the girl. "It's Tracy, eh? Always Tracy. Well, by hell—he's through! Yuh hear me? Smashed! An' I helped smash him! I did it an' I'm glad! I—"

Helen Lambert shrank away; a sudden, fearful realization darkened her eyes. "Billy! You didn't! You couldn't—"

He stood before her, white and quivering. Rage seemed to swell within him—rage that burned away every emotion except hate.

"I did an' I'm glad! Yuh hear me—glad!" Billy stepped back; he flung one arm in a wild, angry gesture. "An' yuh won't have Tracy! Not ever! Yuh won't have him!"

"Billy!"

"Yuh won't have him!" Billy shrieked again, and wheeled toward his horse.

Helen Lambert cried after him: "Billy—no!" But he didn't hear; he ran blindly on. Gaining the saddle, he whipped his horse to a dead run along the road Steve Tracy had taken.

CHAPTER V

Lobo's Last Ride

THE scene below came to Tracy in scattered fragments as he drove madly down the slope. One puncher, barricaded behind a rock, took a sheepman's bullet and toppled with a wild, fading cry. Someone roared a curse. Ruttner's men continued their circled attack. He himself remained in the background, a big figure safely placed while his hired guns did their work.

No one saw Tracy at first; there was enough sound to dull their senses, and so he reached the last full sweep of the hill before Ruttner's glance whipped up to him. Ruttner twisted in the saddle, reined his horse about. A warning yell dropped from his lips. The yonder circle of attack faltered and broke for one startled instant. There was a quick exchange of shouts, then three men wheeled to charge Tracy's advance.

Ruttner screamed: "Take him, you fools!"

Over in the rocks, Lafe Judd's voice sent up a cry that might have held anger or might have held fear. It was just a stream of muted sound in Tracy's ear, a sound without full meaning.

The riders bore down, guns poised. Tracy flung himself flat against his pony's mane and pulled away from them, starting to circle. There was just one thought within him now, one driving purpose. He must reach Hugo Ruttner. He must kill Ruttner. There was no alternative.

In that one act lay success. For Ruttner's men were only money-fighters; they had no real stake in the battle, nothing except the cash that would reward their gun work. Without Ruttner there would be no cash. Without Ruttner there would be no reason for them to carry the fight to an end.

Ruttner seemed to sense the plan that forced Tracy on. He yelled again: "Stop him!" and pulled his horse back, farther from the line of danger. Holding himself there, rigid and ready, he jerked the rifle from its scabbard.

Tracy kicked his horse on, attention glued to those three men flanking him. He saw a gun lift and faintly heard the shot. Lead sang past, missing him by a wide margin. Tracy held his own

piece ready. But he didn't shoot yet; every shell counted.

One of the pursuing guns snapped again. The riders fanned out to cover him from three sides. Tracy's lips flattened. Coolly, deliberately, he raised his gun and took a quick sight. The piece bucked in his hand; its roar merged with all the other sound that filled the air.

A man's cry shrilled, broke. One of the riders went sideways from the saddle, hands flung wide. Tracy whipped his aim around, trying to pin a second target. But at that moment he felt his horse falter; the animal screamed like a human in pain, staggered again, then seemed to collapse at the head. Steve Tracy cursed.

He pulled his feet free of the stirrups, jumped. Sand and sage came up to meet him; the impact jarred through his whole frame. One of the attackers yelled—a wild, triumphant yell. A shot spouted sand within an inch of Tracy's boot. He faded back, gradually regaining balance. The two riders closed in.

"Steady—steady—" The one word echoed over and over again within Steve Tracy's brain. Every ounce of will power went into his next few movements. He swept up his gun, fired pointblank at the nearest man, and saw that man sag in the saddle. A slug burned across Tracy's thigh, the force of it jerking him around. The one remaining rider swooped by with a fading yell; his gun blazed three quick shots that brought sand into the air again.

TRACY wheeled; his thumb flipped the hammer. The rider was just turning his horse, pivoting the beast with front legs raised off the ground. Tracy's bullet found its mark there, just under the horse's lifted hoofs. The man in the saddle yelled, then stopped yelling as the animal went over backwards instead of coming down on all fours. There was a scream, quick, terrified. Dust swirled up. The horse crashed and the scream was silenced.

Ruttner's voice swelled in a nasal roar. "Damn you, Tracy!"

A shot licked out, throwing its heat close to Tracy's face. He jumped back, turned. Ruttner was standing straight up in the stirrups, gun leveled. His face was a mottled mask of red and white—of fury and fear. The gun snarled again. Lead nicked Tracy's left arm, gouging out a shallow wound.

"Damn you, Tracy—"

And those were the last words Hugo Ruttner spoke. Steve Tracy clenched his teeth. All mercy—all humanity—left him and he was merely a cold, driving machine. A machine that had one job to do. His right arm stiffened out. Ruttner's poised body lay between the sights. Then the rifle let go. Ruttner's body faded from view, fell slowly. One choked cry came from the man; his horse bucked off with an empty saddle.

A shrill call sailed across to Tracy. "Steve—look out! Look out!" He heard it and he whirled. Two more of Ruttner's men charged toward him. Two more—and there were others.

Tracy cursed. He threw himself sideways, went headlong for the protection of his fallen horse. He thumbed one shot at those figures bearing down; he sent a second on its way—and then the hammer clicked dismally on an empty shell.

The riders swooped on—on. Wild impatience tore at Tracy's nerves. He opened the loading gate, began to pluck cartridges from his belt. A bullet spatted the body of the dead horse; another threw sand into Tracy's face. He grated an oath. His fingers were alll thumbs, unable to move with speed. At last—it seemed that ages had gone by—he managed to slip three shells into the gun. He clicked the loading gate shut.

Then, quite suddenly, one of the charging horses snorted, stumbled, went somersaulting into the sage. Its

rider landed in a limp heap and lay still. Tracy's gaze caught a brief glimpse of Lafe Judd, standing atop one of those yonder boulders. Judd had a rifle against one cheek and was methodically pumping lead across the distance. Another horse sprawled. The rest of Ruttner's men bunched up, milled in confusion.

Someone grunted: "Hell—let's get out o' here!" They broke, scattered, and there was a quick fan-out across the flat. Judd sent two more shots after those retreating figures; he roared a curse that followed them away.

"Over," Tracy thought. "It's over—done." A surge of fatigue went through him; the wound in his leg began to throb and the nicked spot on his arm burned painfully. But these things didn't matter now. The fight was won.

Judd and Rickerson piled from the boulder patch, followed by four whooping punchers. Tracy stood up, limped forward; his leg pained, but it held his weight.

"We turned 'em, Tracy!" Judd bellowed. "We turned 'em, man! That there rush yuh made shore—"

But Steve Tracy's mind was on another thing, on thoughts of Pitchfork, now reduced to ashes. He waved Judd aside and started for one of the riderless mounts that shied nervously around the flat.

"Going home, Judd. I want to see what's left."

"Yeah—an' me, too," Judd agreed grimly.

Rickerson called after Tracy: "Steve, we been so damned blind we couldn't have seen the end of our nose if we looked cross-eyed. An' if you hadn't—"

Tracy paid no attention. He caught a horse—the first one he could reach—and turned up the slope. At the top he looked back to see the men below catching their own horses, preparing to ride. He smiled flatly, shook his head. A long sigh escaped him as he started homeward at a brisk canter.

Almost at once, he halted. A clump of brush lay straight ahead, and that brush moved with the stealth of a hidden body. Steve Tracy jerked back the reins, swung around. Then he saw Billy Drost step into view, and all the tenseness left him.

"Hi, kid. I reckon—"

Billy's lips drew back. His voice was a thin slap across the distance. "To hell with yuh, Tracy!"

"What?" Surprise shocked through Tracy's mind; it numbed him, froze his thoughts. Staring blankly, he saw Billy Drost whip up a gun!

"To hell with yuh!" Billy repeated. There was no softness about him, no hint of any friendly regard. The black snout of his .45 clung to Tracy for a moment that seemed a year. It spat a rush of smoke and sound and flame.

"Billy!"

Tracy felt the shock of that lead. It tore into his chest, hurling him back. He was falling, dazed by a cold astonishment. Faintly, he heard his horse snort as it shied away. The ground rose to meet him. And then blackness closed in.

THE soft pleading of a woman's voice called Tracy back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, and for a moment he could remember nothing that had happened. Helen Lambert leaned over him; his head was cradled in her lap. Farther above, like dim shadows, he could see the anxious features of Judd and Rickerson and their men.

"What—" Then Tracy remembered; a shock of dull pain went through him again. He looked at Helen. "Billy—where is he?"

There were tears in Helen Lambert's eyes. Her voice was quite hollow and lifeless. "He's dead, Steve."

Tracy clenched his teeth. "Dead? Did I—"

Lafe Judd answered that. "No. Not yuh, Tracy. The kid killed himself.

Yuh see, we heard them shots an' rode hell f'leather up here to see what was happenin'. Billy saw us comin'. He started to run. Then he stopped an' he—he—"

Steve Tracy closed his eyes. There was a sucked-out silence around him, a silence in which everything seemed to die. Then, faintly, he heard Helen Lambert speaking again.

"He—he's been against you from the start, Steve," she said gently. "He admitted it. He was helping Ruttner and he hoped to kill you."

"Came near doin' it, too," Judd growled. "If that shot had been an inch lower—"

Tracy looked up at Helen. "You poor kid," he said. "You poor kid."

"No. Not me, Steve. It's you who—" She struggled against a tremor that broke her words. "He posed as your friend, Steve Tracy. But all the time he hated you. He was jealous—"

"Jealous?" Steve muttered. "Jealous of *me?*"

A slow flush touched Helen's cheeks. There was no actual happiness in her eyes. But a dull sort of hope came to relieve the stark horror there.

She spoke very softly. "Are you blind, Steve Tracy? Who do you think I came out here to—"

"Helen! You mean—"

Lafe Judd was saying: "He won't be able to ride, but that buckboard the gal brought out'll do for—"

Fred Rickerson nudged him. "Come on, you blamed fool! There's one'r two things in life that should be plumb private." He indicated Tracy and the girl with a jerk of his thumb. "Looks like somethin's goin' to come out right in this mess, after all!"

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Desert Dinero

By Robert W. Cochran

After twenty years of prospecting, an old desert rat finally strikes pay dirt — by following a buzzard's shadow.

"FOOLISH" PETER GILLEY covered the last half mile to Sunken Well in the manner of a man who is just a little disgusted with the cards life had dealt him. He wondered, as he watched his shadow advance doggedly at his side, just how many times he had made the trek to Sunken Well. It was the halfway mark to the mountains where, for more than two decades, Foolish Peter had been prospecting.

People called him that because a lot of them didn't believe that he had ever made a strike there in the first place. A few of the old-timers admitted, when pressed, that Peter Gilley had shown up twenty-odd years before with some likely looking specimens of raw gold. And he had searched since then, year in and year out, for the lost mine. He traveled at first by burro but later on foot as his funds gave out, the three hundred miles across the scorching sand that lay between the mountains where he searched and the nearest town where he must go for supplies.

He was able, when he was lucky, to pick enough free gold here and there to meet his needs. And, when he wasn't lucky, one of the old-timers usually came to his rescue and grubstaked him.

He shuffled into Sunken Well, a scant two quarts of water in his canteen. Usually he made the trip from Overland in four days. This time it had taken him five. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but he knew that this would probably be his last trip to the mountains. If he didn't find

a pay streak this time— He didn't like to think about the alternative.

His mild, sun-bleached eyes looked in alarm at the dry spot in the sand where a well should have been. "Second time in nearly thuty years," he muttered. He took the pack of flour, tea, and salt from his back, and was preparing to descend the shallow incline to the well when a black speck in the sky, that became two and then three, drew his attention.

"Hell," he said aloud, and wondered what other man was fool enough to be traveling around the dry waste. He looked again at the well. Then with a sigh that made the white mustache tremble, he took up his canteen and started toward the spot where the buzzards were converging.

A hundred yards away, the figure of a man arose from a clump of parched mesquite and started forward.

Foolish Peter said, "Dude," beneath his breath, and stopped. His keen eyes missed no detail, from the tin helmet to the low-cut oxfords. "Try a drink of this." Peter extended his canteen. "Easy now, the well's dry back there."

"I know it's dry." the stranger rasped, "but there's enough in this to see me through."

"That's all the water I got," Foolish Peter said cheerfully.

THE city man galvanized into action. "Don't move, you old desert rat." Peter saw an extremely business-like looking gun pointing at his head. "I'm taking this, see, and if you've got anything else over there in your pack, I'll take it along."

"Kinda forehanded, ain't you, takin' stuff what don't belong to you?"

"I take what I want, see, and if you don't like it—" He pushed the gun a little nearer.

" 'S a killin' crime stealin' water on the desert," Foolish Peter said reprovingly.

"One more killing crime won't matter. Maybe you know who I am?" The man's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Reckon I do," Foolish Peter said. "Hearn 'bout a killin' over in Sundust. City feller got 'way with eight, nine thousand dollars."

"All right," the weapon motioned toward the waterhole, "now that you know, watch your step. They can't hang a man but once."

" 'S worse ways of dyin'," Foolish Peter said, rubbing his tongue along his gums from which a burro had removed the teeth twenty years earlier.

"Listen, feller." The man leaned menacingly over Peter as he sat later with his arms clasped about his knees. "I don't want to kill you, see; but I'm taking your water and I'm taking your grub. Any objection?"

At first Peter seemed perfectly reconciled at the loss. Then he glared up indignantly at the big man. "Better kill me and be done with it. Ain't no water closer'n a hundred mile."

"I know," the man laughed without humor, "but desert rats don't need water." Stooping, he ran a hand expertly over the old man's person. "You're a hell of a guy," he said. "Don't even carry a gun."

"Don't need a gun on the desert." Foolish Peter pointed significantly to the specks still circling overhead.

"Buzzard bait," the big man scoffed, "You maybe, not me."

"How far you reckon that two quarts o' water's goin' to take you?" Peter asked mildly.

"Far enough," the man said. "I'm not a fool. I'll prove it," he said. "Here, give me your hat. Damn near fried under that steel lid. Maybe your head's harder than mine." He picked up his pack and prepared to move off, watching the old man cautiously.

"Got the money on you?" Foolish Peter asked, when he was ten yards away.

The man slapped his pockets. "Want to try and take it?"

Peter grinned sheepishly and ran his tongue along his smooth gums. He sat like a weathered, dried-up mummy until the plodding figure had passed

finally over the curve of the desert.

Thirty minutes later, his late companion would have been amazed to have seen the agility the old man showed in scooping out the dry well with the steel hat. First the sand was damp, then wet; and at two feet a trickle of water glinted darkly. Foolish Peter scooped up a cupful in the hat and drank deeply.

At daylight, he was tracking the twelve-hour-old footprints across the waste. A tea can filled with water swung at his side.

It was not until the second day he saw the black specks in the sky ahead of him. "Eight, nine thousand dollars," he said, picking a shiny revolver from beside the trail and thrusting it in his pocket. "Well, they do say, 'gold is where you find it.'

"I'll be glad to get shet of this tin hat, but I never would of got that well scooped out 'thout it."

There's Hell to Pay in Horse Heaven

When Next Western Aces Hits the Stands With Tom Roan's Complete Gun-Busting Novel

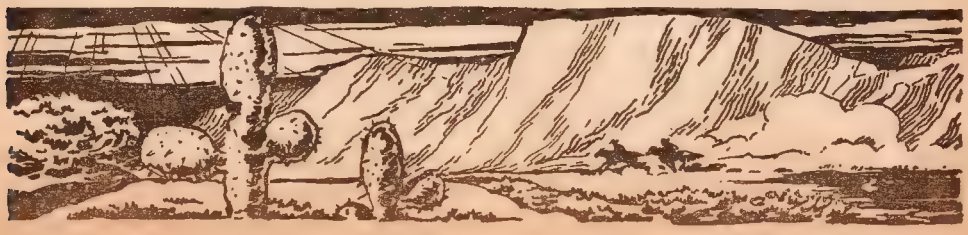
GUNSMITH FROM MONTANA

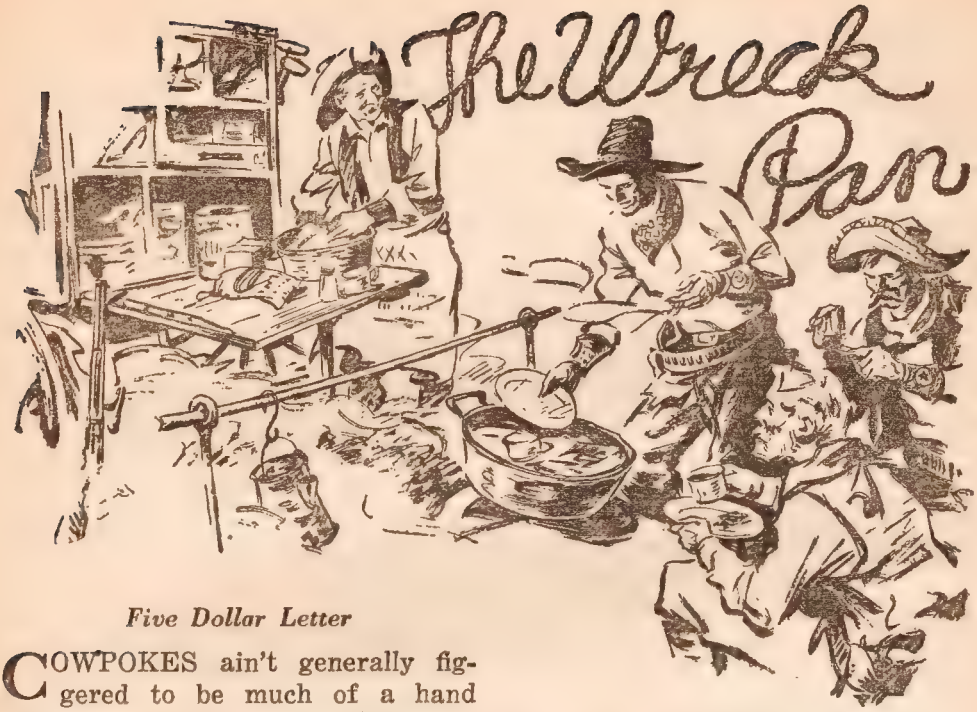
Out December 12th

Also a "Sundown" Jones Story

The Owl Hoot Paymaster

By Charles W. Tyler





Five Dollar Letter

COWPOKES ain't generally figgered to be much of a hand at letter writin', but looks like once they set down to it, they kin punch a typewriter with as much vim an' vinegar as they can chouse a ring-tailed Orejana outen a cuss-breedin' mess o' thorny plum brush. In fact a surprisin' number o' the letters we git seems to be frum the cow-country. Which the same at least must mean that our authors know what they're writin' about.

Don't forgit, however, that each and every reader of Western Aces has a chance to pull down the five bucks. Let's have your ideas about the magazine, criticisms or suggestions—anythin' in fact that has a kick in it for the readers. Everyone put your hat in the ring an' make this your own book. Whether your letter drags down the half a sawbuck or not we may want to print what yuh have to say.

The money this month goes to a cowboy turned prospector. This feller has seen adventure in the hot, cold and uncurried.

Wreck Pan Editor:

Have started letters to you afore now, but decided you was bothered enough as it was with rannyhans writin' in to you, but just caint help it this time, old scout, have got to rare up and tell you and the cockeyed world that you know how to fill a he-man's magazine of the West with yarns by men who know what they're scribin' of. S'pose you've heard that betimes, and wonder how come I savvy whether they're reel stories or real yarns.

Well, lemme tell you, amigo. Where the foothills of the Rockies in Montana break onto the plains country, in a blizzard what musta started at the North Pole and gained orneryness with every mile, darkness just breakin' into scared daylight, with my lasso-rope like a icickle, I've snaked my ring-tailed bronc out of the cavvy with their backs humped to the wind like a bunch of camels.

Startin' out to relieve the night guard what had been fadin' their hosses around a bawlin' and millin' herd, us waddies lotsa times has been spilt in the snow on our Stetsons and Levis, mackinaws and angoras, all because after slappin' on a cold blanket and a forty pound henskin on them humped backs, we fumbled the latigos with fingers stiff as ramrods.

What did us fellahs stand all that for? It would be hard to say. Mostly for forty a month and board. Fifty if you was a bronc fighter, mebbe seventy-five if yuh got to be the main stem.

We might 'a' had a hankerin' after the life without knowin' it, but if anybody'd asked us I don't think we would 'a' said we was in love with its romance and thrills.

Yeah, and I've followed the splash of water behind a bunch of broomtails as they slid into the Rio under a clouded Texas moon while charming Senoritas sung Flor de Amor to the soldiers in the cantina a half mile from the crossin' the soldiers was supposed to be guardin'. That's the life.

I just come out of Alaska by way of Skagway. I come out from the inside where the placer mines lay amongst the high peaks and the glaciers, or just below them. Can you beat that, after all the big gold rushes are over, a cowpoke turnin' to placer minin'? Yes, I can tell a bigger one than that. On the way down I run into a old waddie from Choteau, Montana, who had turned fisherman—but that's another story.

Mebbe I'd better take my dallies on a snubbin' post and hold fast or this ol' machine will run away with me. So I'll say Adios, Ol' Timer, wishin' you the best of luck for the success of yore Western Aces.

A. R. ADAMS,
716 Main St., Grass Valley, Cal.

A FEW words from British Columbia, another place where the "West" is not fading.

Wreck Pan Editor:

Whoever it was said the picturesque West is fading, must never have been to the Okanagan district of British Columbia. There's sure plenty of it up here. In one of these valleys, one known as Meadow Valley, was my home until a short time ago.

I have ridden in roundups of both cattle and horses in these valleys for five years, with my brother, who is my pardner in everything, and we know the feelings shown by your authors.

On the high slopes of the hills there are many wild horses; some of these horses have once been handled, but have gone wild again; these are much harder to catch than the others as they are wise to the traps used by the horse-hunters. Over two hundred head of these horses were rounded up for the Russian government one time. My brother and I took part in this roundup, which lasted for nearly two months. Between roundups it is a very quiet place to live, but those who follow the horse-hunting business get plenty of excitement.

For the game hunter there are plenty of bear, mule-deer, coyotes, cougar, grouse, pheasants and ducks, beside numerous other small game. In the winter, which usually lasts about four months, trapping for weasel, lynx, etc., is a profitable pastime.

Wishing you the best of luck in the future.

D. S. KETCHELL,
2624 Mahon Ave., North Vancouver,
B. C., Canada.

Question Corral

QUESTIONS about cow punching, Western history or any similar subject of interest to WESTERN ACES *readers will be answered in this department each month. We will publish as many answers as we have space for, but it will be impossible to send personal replies by mail.*

Watch the QUESTION *Corral for answers to your queries.*

WOULD you please tell us how wild horses are usually caught? We have read that there are lots of wild horses still running in parts of the West, and would sort of like to try our hand at catching them.

A. R.
Boise, Idaho

Catching wild horses is no business for a novice. It is the most difficult, most dangerous, and most exciting sort of range work. It requires far more skill to round up and corral wild horses than to do any other thing that cowboys are ever called upon to do. In most cases, wild horse catchers are professionals who do nothing else. Coming from the ranks of cowpunchers, they are the hardest riding and most daring of their kind, and few of them ever live to a healthy old age. Yet, there is a wild thrill about it, the excitement of racing wildly over rough country and of pitting one's brain against the cleverest of wild animals, that once a man has known it he seldom if ever gives it up.

There are various ways of catching wild horses. Their use depends on the nature of the country, the character of the horses to be caught, and the preference of the man who is running the roundup. In the early days, the Indians and many of the white settlers used to *walk down* wild horses. At first thought, it is hard to believe that a man can walk down a wild horse, but it is true. The reason for it is that it takes a horse so much longer to feed than it takes a man to eat a meal, and that a horse's hoofs soon get tender when forced over rough country. Thus, after a couple of weeks of dogged, tracking down, the persistent walker has the wild horse thin and weak and tender footed, and thus it can be easily corraled. However, I wouldn't advise anybody to try this method unless he is a walker sure enough.

Another method used by the early settlers was to crease the horse with a rifle bullet. They would attempt to shoot the animal in the hard cartilage that runs along

the back of the neck. If the shot was successful, the animal would be stunned long enough to get a rope on him, but if the shot was unsuccessful, there was as likely as not a dead horse. This is another method that should be tried only by experts.

The usual method, and by far the most exciting method, is for a few fellows to go out, each with a string of tough, fast saddle horses, and attempt to run the wild bunch into a corral or some sort of concealed trap. Thus a wild horse man will locate the range of the particular bunch of wild horses he wants to catch. Then he will build a very high, walled corral or trap in some canyon that the wild bunch has been in the habit of using. That hard work finished, the real excitement of the chase begins. The various men take up positions in the hills so that they may head the wild bunch into the canyon. Then somebody starts the wild bunch moving. Tails and heads up, the wild horses thunder across the range. The wild riding punchers follow, spurring their horses in an attempt to turn the bunch toward the next man. As soon as the herd gets in position, this man takes up the chase and heads them to the next rider and so on until the herd is safely in the corral.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well just try it. Over and over again the wild bunch will be forced to the very entrance of the canyon only to break away again by superior speed or cunning. It is nerve-breaking, disposition-trying work. But it is one of the greatest thrills a man can get.

ON a recent trip down through Arizona, I heard a lot about an old-timer called Bucky O'Neil. He seems to have been quite a hero down in that country, but I had never heard of him. Any dope you can give me about him will be appreciated.

O. A. D.

Spokane, Wash.

Bucky O'Neil was a hero, and still is to those who knew him. Though born in St. Louis and well educated in the East, Bucky O'Neil was a true son of Arizona. In many ways he typified the best of the West he had adopted. In "Famous Sheriffs and Western Outlaws," William MacLeod Raine says of him: "O'Neil was the most many-sided man Arizona has produced. He was a poet, an adventurer, and a scholar. He was editor, lawyer, judge, sheriff, politician, and soldier. He was the wildest of gamblers, the most daring of officers, the shyest of men."

Bucky went west after graduating from the National University with the class of '79. In Phoenix, he went into newspaper work as the editor and manager of the *Herald*. Then he drifted into Tombstone during that town's wild height. Afterwards he practiced law and returned to Prescott, where he was editor of the *Hoof and Horn*, a journal devoted to the interest of stockmen. But all the while Bucky was a patriot and devoted to public service.

O'Neil ran for the job of sheriff in Yavapai County on the simple ticket that the railroad should be taxed for the full value of its property. Feeling ran high because the railroad owned many thousands of acres of land. But O'Neil was elected, and served with the rest of the administration against him. And Bucky, with his dramatic dare-devil ways, made a grand sheriff. He followed one gang of bandits for weeks, had various brushes with them, and then finally captured them all single-handed. Throughout Arizona and even into New Mexico, Bucky became known as one sheriff who would stand for no breach of the peace. Yet Bucky's manner was good-natured, mild, almost apologetic.

Later Bucky was elected judge. There are numerous tales told of his shyness when officiating at marriages, and at least one woman completely routed him when he started action against her husband.

But where women were not concerned, he was a man of iron. His gambling activities are famous. He always played for big stakes and would buck any game. That is where he got his name "Bucky."

When the war with Spain came along, Bucky was one of the first to volunteer. Later he was given a commission in the Arizona troop of the Rough Riders. Today you may see on the Square at Prescott, a replica of Bucky in the bronze statue of a horse and rider, commemorative of the Rough Riders who went from Arizona to Cuba.

One day in Cuba, Bucky's men were lying in a trench. Bucky stood up to talk with Captain House of the artillery. One of his men warned him to get behind some cover. "The Spanish bullet hasn't yet been moulded that can kill me," he answered gaily. Next moment he fell, mortally wounded. So fell one of the most likeable, romantic and picturesque of all Western law officers.

I WOULD like to know if there ever was a real character by the name of Sam Bass. Once or twice I have heard a song about a bad man of that name and he interested me because my name is also Bass.

C. T. B.

Sacramento, Calif.

Sure, Sam Bass was a real man, and a very hard one, too. During the seventies, he was the hero of all young cowboys from Texas to the Canadian line. That song which tells of his life and death has always been a favorite.

Sam was born in Indiana, as the song says, in Lawrence County, in the year 1851. Sam's folks were poor and the boy's early years were spent in plain hard work. He never had any education at all. And the town he grew up in was notorious as a tough place. When he was seventeen, Sam went to Texas and became a cowboy. Around Denton, Texas, he became well known because of his horse racing activities. In 1877, Sam went up the trail with some steers belonging to the Collins brothers, which were sold in the Black Hills of Dakota. After blowing their money, Sam Bass, Joel Collins, Jim Berry and several other Texas cowboys made their headquarters in Dakota and went into the business of holding up stages. After killing a driver, they decided to head back to Texas, stopping in Ogallala, Nebraska, to hold up the Union Pacific.

In the spring of 1878, Bass and his gang again went into the train and bank robbing business on a big scale. Rangers were ordered out with the express purpose of breaking up the gang. This resulted in many battles but nothing really important happened until the Rangers captured Jim Murphy, one of the members of the Bass gang. Murphy agreed to doublecross the gang and was released. Thus he learned that the next plans of the gang included the bank in Round Rock, Texas.

The Rangers were prepared. When the bandits arrived in Round Rock, they had some time on their hands and went into the store for a light lunch. While in there, the back door was suddenly kicked open by Ranger Captain Ware, who stormed into the room accompanied by other Rangers and demanded the surrender of the cowboy bandits. Instantly, the fight started. Outlaw Barnes was killed in the store and with him Ranger Grimes, Ranger Morris being badly wounded.

In the meantime, Sam Bass and his two other partners, Underwood and Jackson, made a break for the front door. Ranger George Harold and another had been stationed across the street. When the outlaws came out of the door, they opened fire. The three bandits succeeded in mounting their horses and getting out of town. But three miles out, Bass was found mortally wounded.

Now comes the question met so often in the lives and deaths of Western badmen. Who fired the shots that killed Sam Bass? Dick Ware, the Ranger, claimed several people believe that the man who really killed Sam Bass was George Harold, who was across the street when the bandits broke out of the front door of the store. This view is taken by Charles A. Siringo in his fine book of the West called *Riata and Spurs.*

For the complete verses of the Sam Bass song you will have to consult either *Riata and Spurs* mentioned above, or *Cowboy Songs* by John A. Lomax, as I haven't the space here to give them.

Loco Limericks

HERE'S another chance for readers to pick up a little "smokin' money"—especially those with a sensitive funny bone. Think up a last line for the limerick below, and send it in. The author of the one used will receive a dollar. The limerick with the last line will be printed month after next with an illustration, and another limerick to be filled out.

A certain cowpuncher named Bobbie,
Rode his mare back and forth in the lobby;
When they told him, indoors
Is no place for a horse,

.....

There is still time if you move fast enough, to get last month's money, too. Last month's limerick went like this:

A bronc with a bad reputation
Drew the meanest cowhand in the nation.
He broke plum in two
Till the leather goods flew

.....

The $1.00 for last month's last line goes to Jose Jones of Agua Prieta, Mexico. It took some figgerin' to think up a last line for this one:

A cowboy while out on the range
Found an outlaw attacked by the mange.
He said take a leaf from the book of our beef,
And roll in the mud for a change.

Over the Hill

It was hell's fire on the Horse Heaven Range that the man who called himself John Lane left behind him when he shot the bartender in Poker Flats and headed hot heeled for Cut-Throat Pass. He had a date with death, and John Lane never broke a date.

It was a hard date to keep, a date that took him the length of the sky-high Rockies from south to north in company with as unsavory a trio of killers as ever slit a man's throat in his sleep.

It was a date with honor, a date with the law on his heels, and yet with

outlaws camping on his trail, a date that only a man of timber-tough nerves and knife-edged wits could have come out alive to keep. But John Lane was just such a man, and whether the death to be met was his own or another man's made, no never you mind in the way he set his course.

The exciting saga of John Lane's saddle trail will be told in the February Western Aces in Tom Roan's latest novel — GUN SMITH FROM MONTANA. On the stands December 22nd. C-o-ooo-o me an' G-e-e-e-t It!

America's biggest cigar value ... SOLD AT SMALLEST PROFIT

Cremo CREAM O' THEM ALL 3 FOR 10¢

Gun Cub from Hell's Gap

By Peter Germane

The clash of opposing forces had split Cibola into two factions—honest miners with big stakes in the gulch, men who dimly foresaw a peaceful town growing on the banks of the twisting creek. These backed Cole Lemery. On the other side were the gamblers, the hangers-on, the drifters and the shiftless, brought together under the leadership of Swed Meley. And into this tension there came a trigger-swift youth from the Vultures with an eleven-year mission of death corroding his hate-filled heart.

THE gibbous moon peered coldly through a break in the hurrying clouds. The gaunt figure, prone on the rimrock, stabbed a scarred finger toward the light cluster of the dark gulch. "Cibola, son!" The words were a rattle in his scrawny throat. "An' Cole Lemery!" His harsh, wild laugh was whipped away by the cold wind sweeping the rimrock.

Gray storm clouds piled over the moon's face, and black darkness dropped. The shadowy, jagged masses of the Vultures loomed over the gulch. Hate was a-wing that stormy night—and death was in the offing.

The lean figure, prone beside the gaunt man, rose. "I'm ready, dad!" His voice was like stone, emotionless, cold.

The gaunt figure straightened, a little clumsily, as if muscles were bound. The moon shafted light through a rent in the cloud mass, and the beams touched his horribly scarred face, his clawed, shrivelled hands. His hair was white, and his brows were white, and his once broad shoulders were bowed. Fire had done that to Monte Payson—a roaring inferno that had burned itself into his memory as it had burned its scars on his body.

The figure beside him was straight, broad shouldered, clad in fringed buckskin. A cartridge belt hung from a lean waist. Its holster was empty. The youngster moved, following his father to the picketed horses just back from the rim. His walk was a smooth, soundless thing.

The scarred man fumbled in his saddle pocket. His fingers trembled as he pulled forth a Colt. An ordinary looking gun, a .45, barrel, nicked, black handle worn and slightly burned. In that handle two initials had been carved: C. L.

The youngster took it. He stepped back, while the older man watched, eyes glittering. Glittering with a terrible fire. Hate, a terrible, burning hate, forged in an inferno of flame, was alive in those eyes. He watched the youngster slip the Colt into his holster, waited a moment, breathed: "Now!"

He was staring into the vague muzzle before the word left his lips. A magic draw, unseen, almost incredible even to him who had drilled it into the youngster.

He nodded his head. "Eleven years!" He seemed to be speaking to the rushing wind. "We are ready!"

The youngster swung lithely to saddle. He looked down at the gnarled fingers. His face was impassive. Only one emotion had been drilled into him from childhood—hate. Hate for the man whose initials were carved on that gun.

His father's voice crackled: "I'll be waitin,' son."

The lithe figure nodded. The dark swallowed him as he rode along the rim.

For seconds the scarred Payson stared. Then he turned, shuffled back to the rim, peered down at the cluster of lights that made up the gold town of Cibola. But he saw only a broad, hard face, direct gray eyes, a cleft chin—and he saw that face stiffen, go gray with fear, heard, almost, the smash of an exploding .45, and blood, trickling from a hard mouth. . . .

The harsh, rattling laugh borne away by the rising wind was as savage and cruel as the jagged rises of the Vultures.

CIBOLA sprawled over the floor of the canyon, its flimsy frame buildings, its tents, stretching back from the twisting band that was Gold Creek to the abrupt first rises of the Vultures—a straggling boom town, wild and raucous and as transient as the wind that nightly whispered down from the ragged heights. The signs of its impermanence were written in every false fronted dive, in the hard faces of the barroom crowds, in the empty laughter of its painted women.

Over a million dollars in gold dust had been taken from the creek and squandered over the bars for liquor, or raked in by hard-eyed, fast-shooting men behind faro layouts or poker tables.

Surging against the roaring lawlessness of this boom town an iron fisted man strove, fighting to bring law and order into the gulch. A big, solid man, gray of hair, bushy of brow, rugged of face and gray, direct eyed—Cole Lemery, marshal of Cibola.

The clash of opposing forces had split Cibola into two factions—honest miners with big stakes in the gulch, men who dimly foresaw a

peaceful town growing on the banks of the twisting creek. These backed Cole Lemery. On the other side were the gamblers, the hangers-on, the drifters and the shiftless, brought together under the leadership of Swed Meley. Tall, angular, suave and deadly—Meley saw nothing in Cibola except the gold that passed over his tables, and cared little for the lives that were wrecked. A hill wolf, born to prey on the sheep that grubbed in the hills.

On this fateful night Lemery sat alone in the small cubbyhole that was his office. The lamp flame struck his features at an odd angle, and the shadows in his craggy face were deep. Once his right hand fisted as he stared at the black window, and the slight movement of his broad body glinted the badge on his black coat.

He turned his great head, his eyes glowing, as steps grated outside his door. His great body gave the impression of slowness, but of a slowness that, once thrust into motion, could not be stopped.

The in-swinging door gave view of dark night, a slender, auburn-haired girl, and a wiry man of medium height, with sloping shoulders and bitter eyes. A wind came with them, dark and rushing, wavering the flame in the wall lamp.

The oldish man with the bitter eyes closed the door, his motions deliberate and expressive. He stood there by the door, while the girl stepped forward, her eyes dark with strain, with fear. Like a wild thing she was, in homespun dress, glinting hair falling back on her shoulders.

Lemery rose to meet her.

"Uncle Lemery," she cried, that twist of fear in her voice. "You're not going through with it. You can't!" Her fingers clutched at his mighty arms, dug into iron muscles. "It's death—with all your courage, your strength—it will still be death. Can't you see?" She twisted a white face back to the silent man by the door. "Tell him, Harry!"

HARRY shrugged, and that lift in his shoulders was as bitter as the look in his eyes. His rough miner's garb clung tightly over his steel wire frame. The gun on his hip was set at an awkward angle; it hinted of none too much familiarity with it—yet what Harry might lack in gun speed was made up by nerve. It was in his eyes, in the set of his lean jaw.

"They're scared, Cole," he said softly. "Scared of Swed an' his killers. His lips twisted with that bitterness that was part of him. "Honest miners, who elect a marshal, an' then back out on him. Back out because the wolves they want driven out show their teeth!" His voice sank low, and the wind made soft noises against the flimsy shack.

"Only me an' you, Cole—an', mebbe—" he looked at the girl—"mebbe it'll be only me. I'm steppin' into the Red Palace tonight, as agreed—I'm goin' up to Swed, smirkin' behind thet green table, an' I'm gonna pull a gun!" Silence, cold and brooding, fell, and the flickering light twisted over his bitter face. "An' mebbe, if the gods are just, I'll pay for my brother."

The girl shuddered. The man's voice was low, yet a terrible feeling was in it—a bitter fatalism. All her life Margot Lemery had been with hard men; only dimly did she remember her mother. Her father had been a wanderer in the hills, and after his wife's death, had taken her with him. Violence and death had been part of existence, as well as blinding sun, slashing rain, the lonely call of the wild creatures, the rustle of wind in the pines.

Alone, after her father's death, Cole Lemery had come to take her with him. A big, grim man whose past was hinted in the lines of his face—a hard man who wasn't used to being gentle. But who had treated the daughter of his brother with a tenderness the girl had never experienced.

To her this big man had become as father and mother, and as such, fear for him wracked her. "Harry!" she pleaded, twisting back to the bitter man. "No, Harry—don't say that. There must be some other way. We must wait till the miners see the foolishness of their fear, the fear that keeps them from uniting solidly against Meley and his gunmen. Alone, you two—!" she paused, sensing the inexorableness in the two men. "There must be another way. Must law always come through bloodshed and hate and violence?"

"Aye, girl!" Lemery's voice was a low rumble. On his features were etched the hard years. "The law must first be won, Margot—wrested from men like Swed Meley. Codes, words, order—they mean nothin' to such men. Only—" His big hands brushed the grim butts of his low hanging guns, and Harry smiled.

THE girls' shoulders slumped. "Then you are going, you two alone, to clean out Swed Meley's place?"

The marshal nodded. "We'll be the break-up, Margot—Harry an' I. Mebbe, after, the miners will take up where we left off!"

The girl came toward him again, her eyes shining, misted. "Uncle Lemery!" There was a throb in her voice, a great pride and a great sorrow. He looked down at that shining face, this big, iron-hard man who was going to his death. The lines in his broad face softened, and the hardness of his gray eyes changed. Margot alone saw the moisture that appeared in them. "Margot," he said clumsily, "I might not see you again, to say it. But, if ever I had a daughter, I could not have liked her more."

The strain broke in the girl at those simple words, and she buried her face on his great chest. For an interval her choked sobs sounded in the small room. The bitterness ebbed down in Harry's eyes, and his lips twisted with silent pity.

Lemery slowly pushed her away. "Go to Mrs. Berger's house, an' stay there. No matter what happens, what you hear, stay there!" He looked down at her. "An'—goodby, Margot."

Slim arms reached up; moist lips pressed against his beard roughened cheek; a tear stained face strained close. Then she was gone, quickly, into the night.

Lemery stood there, staring at the door. The wind murmured against the shack. Harry stood silent, respecting the feeling in the big lawman. Slowly Lemery lifted a thick finger to his face where Margot had kissed him.

Abruptly he changed. It was the iron-handed marshal of Cibola that spoke. "Come, Harry. We got work to do!"

Harry nodded, and followed him out into the storm-brewing night.

MARDY VILLON'S Stage Line loomed up out of the dark, a low, solid structure, close to the out trail. Yellow light splashed uncertainly from behind grilled windows. From the black yard in the rear waiting horses stamped restlessly, their occasional snorts coming to the two men who paused before the door.

There was a low murmur of voices in the stage office. Harry gripped Cole's arm as the marshal stepped up. His voice was flat, hard. "I don't trust this Mardy Villon a hell of a lot, Cole." The bitterness in his eyes was like a thing alive. "I can't get rid of the feelin' Swed learned of my brother's gold strike through Villon. I got a feelin' like that tonight—some way, George Marlin's gonna be crossed—somehow he's gonna die."

He laughed shortly, with bitter mirth. About them the rising wind made rustling sound. Over the rimrock lightning traced a vivid path. The sullen thunder rumble was like an omen.

Lemery shrugged great shoulders. "Mebbe yo're right. I've had a hunch, myself, about the way Meley an' his

cut-throats got wind of gold shipments, of miners with filled pokes. His great hands spread in a hard gesture. The grilled light was partly in his face which was like stone, chiseled and grim in the glare. "But I never had proof, Harry. An' now—" his shoulders moved again, and he looked meaningly back along the dark street.

Abruptly Lemery turned, knocked on the wooden panel. He turned the knob and thrust his heavy shoulders against the door.

Harry followed him in.

In a swivel chair behind a flat-topped desk a fleshy man closed his mouth over words, and swiveled to face the door. Gray business clothes lay rumpled over his fat body. He had full red lips that were always moist, and heavy, sagging jowls. Small eyes seemed lost in the fleshy folds of his face.

Across from him, near a battered wooden filing cabinet, a small, spare man paused in his nervous pacing of the floor. The light on the wall bracket reflected from his thin, alert features, showed the relief that sprang into his eyes.

Behind him, by the back wall, flanking a tarpaulin covered object two burly miners lowered their rifles. One of them licked dry lips, his tightened features relaxing.

The fat stage line owner put his hands on the desk top, and rose heavily. He spoke across the desk. "We've been waitin' fifteen minutes, Lemery." His voice was cold, sneering.

There was a strain between them, a strain that reached back into the years. Back more than a score of them, when this man, Mardy Villon, had been leaner, and partner with one Monte Payson of the Cross in a Box spread in Gray Valley, Arizona.

The room seemed to dissolve for an instant before Lemery's eyes, and the years fall away. He was a young man, riding to call on Nan Jepson, belle of the valley. The picture of her, dark-eyed, laughing, dimple cheeked, had never left him; not even after she married Monte Payson. Monte of the careless, easy ways, with the love of life in his deep voice.

GRIMLY Lemery shut out memories. There were things in those years that were best forgotten. His jaw muscles bulged with the effort. It was Villon, waving a pudgy hand to the thin-featured man that jerked the marshal back to Cibola, and its problems. Mardy was saying: "You know George Marlin?"

Lemery nodded. Behind him Harry had closed the door. The miner was leaning back against it with an air of indifferent waiting.

George Marlin was the super of the newly opened Lucky Cuss mine up the creek. His blue eyes slid from Lemery to Harry, back to the marshal. He said, slowly, and seemed to lean on the words: "The miners, marshal—they backin' you?"

It seemed to Lemery that Mardy, also, seemed to hang on his answer. The fat man had both his palms on the desk top; he was leaned forward over it, watching Lemery.

Lemery said: "No," in a hard voice.

For a moment there was silence. The clock on the mantle ticked, ticked, ticked. The low rumble of thunder seeped into the room.

The super let his hands fall limp by his sides. Disappointment was an open thing in his gaze.

Villon sneered as he came around the desk, something gleaming behind the soapy film of his eyes.

"We been waitin' a week for this, Lemery," he snapped. "Waitin' for the cleanup you been promisin'!" He laughed, shortly, nastily, his jowls shaking. "Law—hah! There ain't no law—long as Meley an' his gunmen are free to come an' go. No shipment is safe, no claim secure!" His padded shoulders quivered, he cut his words and turned his head toward Marlin.

The super shrugged. His face was set, and the stamp of disappointment, of failure, was on it. "I banked on your word, Cole. You said you were closing the Red Palace tonight. Wiping out that rat's nest. You said you'd have men behind you."

HIS voice was flat, almost lifeless. "I've got the bullion ready for shipment. We smuggled it down from the mine," he jerked his head toward the tarpaulin guarded by the two riflemen. "So far no one but we here know about it. With you and the miners smashing at the Red Palace, Meley and his gunmen would have had no time for the stage. Now—" he shrugged, his thin features hardening.

"We'll have to chance it anyway. There's thirty thousand in that box. It's got to get through to Johnsville this week. For new machinery. If we lose it," his shoulders lifted expressively—"it means the end of the Lucky Cuss!"

The marshal's broad face was like chiseled stone. "That's why I came here, tonight, Marlin. The play goes through as planned. Better send yore two men with the stage, just in case. Me an' Harry here are goin' callin' on Swed—jest the two of us, an' a li'l joker we'll be pickin' up."

A queer silence settled in that room. Mardy stiffened, his eyes flickering. "Yo're crazy!" he finally sneered. His voice was thick, clogged somewhere in his fat throat.

The two guards at back of the room shifted. The rustle of their movement was lost in the near, sullen rumble of thunder.

Marlin stared. A nervous laugh jerked from his thin lipped mouth. But it died, slowly, sensing the grim, unshakable purpose in the big lawman. There were things in the stony-faced marshal, in the cool indifference of the bitter-eyed Harry by the door—things that convinced. It was crazy that feeling that gripped George Marlin. Two men—against Meley's wolf pack.

He looked again at Harry. And saw something in those bitter eyes that sent a shiver through him. He saw a man walking hand in hand with death, and sneering—saw a faint writhing of impatience back of the icy bitterness.

The stiffness left Mardy's fat figure. Something seemed to loosen in him; seemed to laugh, far back in his eyes. He said: "Yo're a fool, Lemery. You always were. Even back in Gray Val—" The rest of it dribbled into incoherence as Lemery swung abruptly about.

Mardy's breath caught in his throat, his eyes bugged. He took a half-stumbling step backward, his face pasty, his hands clawing up, as if to fend off the sudden threat of violence.

The hard-faced lawman gripped himself with an effort. The twisting fire in his eyes faded. There was contempt in his gaze as he turned from the frightened stage man. Without a word he jerked his head to the waiting Harry, and started out.

Marlin stopped him in the doorway. The super thrust out his hand. He said, quite simply. "Good-by, Cole."

He stood there, after the handclasp, watching the two men vanish into the dark. The gloomy street was quiet, as if sensing the hell that was due soon to rock it. The lightning flashes were bolder now. Thunder was a heavy, repeated sound.

Neither he, nor the two guards in the room noticed the sneer that crooked Mardy's moist lips, the mockery that was unmasked in his eyes.

"Fools!" the words formed on Mardy's lips. But he forced his features into concerned look as Marlin turned. The floor quivered under his heavy tread.

"I'm goin' an' get Joe," he told the super. "He's in the saloon across the street. Soon as the rumpus starts in the Red Palace we'll load the bullion

into the stage. With luck Joe ought to get that shipment through to Johnsville."

Marlin nodded. But some twist in Villon's face stiffened him, sent a vague chill through him. It grew as the stage man's bulky figure vanished into the darkness. His eyes were frowning and a little cold as he closed the door and turned back into the office.

HEAVY AND SULLEN the storm clouds piled over Cibola, so low they seemed to scrape the canyon walls in their passage. Nature seemed at one in her angry mood with the boiling passions that were about to dynamite the gold town.

Down from the rimrock, at about eleven o'clock, a man rode. He came out of the past, this lithe figure in buckskin, into that tangle of cross-purposes. Lean and straight, with a gun riding low on his hip.

He came with the wind and the dark and the storm, and he seemed part of it. His brown, impassive face was cold, his motions as smooth and effortless as some great cat's. A hill dweller come to town. To kill!

The lights splashing thinly into the street, the subdued sounds of men and movement, the dark building bulks revealed fitfully in bluish glare as lightning traced a jagged path through the sky—these things were outside young Cord Payson. Eleven years alone in the hills, with his half-crazy father for company, the solitude of whispering pines, the lonely howl of timber wolves—these had built things in him. Men and towns were alien.

One purpose rode him. A purpose built up through those years by a story told and retold in the brooding quiet of the hill nights.

So, impassive and implacable, Cord Payson came into Cibola to kill Cole Lemery.

The wide front of a two story structure loomed on his right. A cloth sign flapped in the wind. Cord read the name as he slid from saddle before an empty rail. The Red Palace. He felt eyes watching him, studying him, from the dark ground. Felt a dangerous tension that seemed to isolate that big gambling hall.

The shrug of his wide shoulders rippled muscles under his buckskin shirt. Firm lips crooked a little as he went up the stairs.

Light from within made a splash before the door. Into that light a figure loomed. Noiselessly, out of the darkness of the porch. Thin, big hatted—a challenge in his slouched posture.

Cord payson felt the rake of hard eyes in the shadow of the sombrero. Felt the wariness ebb in the gunman. A hard, wordless figure he stood there as Cord brushed by, parting the batwings.

The tension inside the Red Palace was more pronounced. Cord sensed it, even as his keen gaze took in the setting. Sensed it, and, instinctively, grew more alert.

There was dynamite in that hushed quiet.

The Red Palace had little of glitter. There were card and crap tables and roulette layouts on one side, a long bar in the rear. Over the bar was an open balcony from which stairs came down along the left wall into the big room. Doors fronted that balcony, visible from the barroom below.

THE big gambling hall seemed almost empty. Certainly it did not have the crowd usual to booming gold towns.

At the gambling tables a handful of men twisted nervously with the fanning batwings. At the bar six men straightened, expectantly. Hard, glittering eyes focused on Cord. Low-gunned, cold-faced men, waiting.

Cord paced to the bar, his face immobile under that silent scrutiny. One thought beat coldly in his head.

Death was waiting for someone in this saloon.

It was in the eyes of those gunmen. In the quiet expectancy that hovered in the air.

Cord's stride was even-paced.

The barkeep, a brawny, heavy-jawed fellow, had his elbows on the wet bar. He started to scowl as Cord faced him. He changed the scowl. He felt suddenly cold at the base of his spine. A little sick at his stomach.

Those eyes! Yellow, glinting—with hell inside them. Yeah—hell! That was the impression the barman got. Instinctively he pulled away, running his tongue over dry lips.

Cord's level voice asked quietly: "I'm lookin' for a gent callin' himself Cole Lemery. Know where I can find him?"

The barman seemed to have lost his voice. But, ten feet along that bar the foremost of the lean gunmen answered for him. He was a thin lipped hombre, with a habit of squinting of his left eye. He turned, balancing his long body on wide-spread feet. "What do you want of Lemery, stranger?"

The light from the overhead lamp was in Cord's face as he turned. It seemed to play tricks in his yellow eyes. His lips crooked into a thin, dangerous smile. "You guess!" he said softly.

The gunman stiffened. His left eye seemed to close entirely. The facial motion drew his features into a vicious cast. From the other side of a thin nose his right eye glittered dangerously. Behind him his companions stirred.

A voice struck into that sudden stir of hostility, easing the tension. A low, modulated voice, that yet carried more of danger in its sound than the slouched gunman before Cord.

"Shore, stranger— I know where Lemery is."

Payson moved his lithe body around so he could see the gunman at the bar and the speaker behind the roulette table.

He saw a tall, angular man watching him. Saw a white shirt, a black bow tie, a long black coat. Crossing gun belts were strapped over that coat. Above the bow tie jutted a battle-axe face, the sharpness of it accentuated by long sideburns, a thin, hooked nose.

The man came around the table toward Cord. He walked with a sort of humped motion, accentuated by a hunch in his sloping shoulders. Like some gaunt gray lobo he walked.

"Lemery is the marshal of this town, kid!" That soft, almost purring voice seemed at odds with the man. "You can mebbe find him in his office, down the street. Or, if you want to wait—" thin lips twisted wolfishly— "I've heard he's gonna pay us a little call right here. Soon!"

Cord shrugged. So that's who they were waiting for. Lemery.

They would wait. He had waited eleven years. It was a long time.

He turned. Out of his eye corners he caught movement on the balcony. A door, the one on the right end, opening a crack. And he felt eyes watching. A gun trained.

A sneer came unbidden to his face. All this, for one man. For Lemery. Hell!

He said, coldly: "I'll see Lemery—in his office!"

HE DID NOT see Lemery in his office. He found the squat law shack empty. The light turned low. He backed out, and stood on the low stoop, looking up and down the dark street. A hard uncertainty flared in his tawny eyes.

Restlessly, then, he prowled uptown. Into saloons thick with smoke and quiet with strange tension he went asking, always, the same question.

Lemery seemed to have vanished. Frowning and impatient he came to pause near the southern end of town. The soft, frittering noises of the creek came to him on the wings of the wind. Vivid lightning tore a hole

in the sky blanket. And Cord thought of the scarred man, waiting.

He cursed, silently, a hard movement of lips. The grim waiting men in the Red Palace came to him, the invitation extended. An invitation to a kill.

And then, as he was swinging back, movement in the shadows across the street caught his tawny eyes.

A slash of lightning revealed them, padding swiftly forward. One a lean, catlike figure, moving sinuously. The rifle in his right hand seemed to leap to gleaming life with the flash. Vanish with the drooping of the dark.

Beside him paced a bulky shadow in town clothes. They were moving steadily toward a squat building opposite Cord. A building whose iron grilled windows were like yellow eyes peering into the dark.

The yellow glow from the first window revealed them, faintly, now. The bulky man made a motion with his right hand that sent the catlike figure crouching under that window. He waited a moment while the rifleman set himself. Then he pushed open the door, and closed it behind him.

Cord watched, a hard sneer cutting the grimness of his face. Death was flying low over Cibola. For the intentions of the rifleman under that window were plain.

He had no ideas about intervening. The troubles of Cibola were not his. Only one thing he wanted of this gulch town. One man.

He was turning away when he saw her. The long held rain scudded down at the very moment, thick, pattering drops that pounded suddenly against the structures. The thunder crashes were rolling, heavy sounds. A stab of lightning across that ominous sky showed her lithe figure, hair whipping back on her shoulders, running toward the rifleman by the window.

The dark closed down. Through it cut the sudden crack of a Winchester. The tinkle of falling glass.

Cord went in swift run across the street.

THE catlike killer pulled trigger again through the shattered glass. The rifle sound was lost in the roll of thunder, in the patter of the sheeting rain.

Then Cord saw him straighten, swing around. The light glinted on the cut of his rifle. The girl seemed to appear in the light glow in time to receive the blow glancingly on the head. She was twisted toward the building side in a crumbling heap.

The sinuous killer whipped about. He lined the rifle on the unconscious girl.

Cord's slug tipped him back. The rifle flamed toward the sky. Thunder rolled over the sound.

White teeth showed in a cruel, surprised grimace. The killer seemed to catch himself, twist and lunge forward, right hand raking for his hip gun.

Cord's two slugs sounded as one. They smashed the man back against the building wall. The flare of lightning threw into stark relief a cruel, wet face, horribly shocked. Then the light faded and the killer fell face forward, on his unfired Colt.

Even as he fell a Colt roared twice from within that building of Death. The sounds were still heavy in the night when the door jerked open. A fat man jumped out, yelling: "Beam! What's gone wrong, Beam?" He had a smoking gun in his right fist.

The rain slapped into his fat face. He stepped out of the doorway and nearly stumbled over Beam's sprawled figure. He pulled back, abruptly, his wet face whitening. His heavy jowls quivered. Some sound spun him about to face the lithe figure appearing out of the rain swept dark.

A strange, deadly shock seemed to take hold of him. Like a figure of stone he stood, rooted by an almost incredible fear. The rain washed down his stricken cheeks.

"Payson!" he finally muttered. His voice was a small, shrinking sound.

He wiped a wet hand over his eyes, as though the motion would wipe out the vision. *"Monte Payson!"* His big body seemed to quiver. "No, no—it can't—" Something snapped in him. Tore abruptly at his shrill scream. He jerked up his gun.

Cord Payson shot him through the shoulder.

The slug tipped Mardy Villon back out of the light area. His pained cry clogged in his throat. He lurched away in a shambling run, a wildness bugging out his eyes, a great fear clawing at his insides. That face seemed to follow him through the rain filled night. Cold, remorseless, accusing.

All pretense was stripped from the fleshy man now. The game he had played in Cibola, the bullion he had schemed for, the men he had killed to get it, were forgotten. Out of the past had appeared a face he thought dead—a face that should have been part of the ashes of a fire of long ago.

Through back yards and over fences Mardy ran, unmindful of the slug in his shoulder, the rain that plastered his clothes to his body. His breath came in great gasps now. His voice a slobber of fear as he babbled to himself. The dark bulk of the Red Palace loomed up. The long, outside stairs that led up the back way to rooms on the upper floor.

Villon stumbled up then, only one thought in his head. Swed Meley would protect him. Meley had to protect him. Meley and his guns.

They alone could keep Payson from him.

BUT CORD PAYSON had not followed. The rain made splattering sounds around him as he stared into the gloom. That fat, frightened face stirred at his memory. But full recognition did not come.

The sheeting rain soaked through his buckskin clothes as he turned to the limp girl beyond the sprawled killer. He knelt by her side, a clumsiness, an uncertainty, in his motions. He didn't know what to do.

He slid an arm under, hesitatingly, afraid of the softness of her body. Raised her face to the beat of the rain. A touch of light was on her face, and the beauty of it startled him. Stirred strange emotions in him. He seemed suddenly to become aware of a strange loneliness. Wind and sun and rain and howling winter blizzards—and one voice, savage, hateful, monotonous. Eleven years of it. . . .

The girl stirred in the curve of his arm. Her eyes flickered, opened wide. Cord looked down into them. Brown, dark eyes—like deep pools. He seemed drawn into them, deep, and a curious sense of peace came over the hard youngster. A feeling of kinship. For in those eyes he seemed to see years of loneliness, of rustling pines, the brooding quiet of the hills.

For a long moment it was so. Then the brown eyes changed. Became frightened. She straightened with quick movement. Cord helped her to her feet. Had to hold her swaying body.

She looked down at the dead Beam. Her white face was drawn. "You—*you* killed him?" she whispered.

Cord nodded. "You know him?"

The girl shuddered. "Yes." She steadied herself, then pulled away from him, moving toward the stage office. There was a twist to her face, as though she was afraid of what she would see. From the dark came sounds of squishing feet, heavy, questioning voices. Men attracted by the shots.

A man lurched into the open doorway. Marlin. He sagged against the framing. His thin face was blood smeared from a cut on his forehead. He held a hand tight against his left side. Through his spread fingers blood was making a dark trickle.

"Mardy Villon, the double crossing—!" he gritted. His gaze focussed on the girl. "Margot—" He tried to

walk to her. His legs gave, and he twisted down, a groan cutting reluctantly from his lips.

THE girl knelt beside him. She lifted his head to rest against her breast. Men grouped around. Hard set faces were revealed in the play of lightning across that stormy sky. Over them the rain whipped. There was a sullen mutter in the wind.

Cord stood over the girl. Marlin's face was twisted toward him. Pain made deep lines at the super's mouth corners.

The girl's voice was a ragged sound. "I saw them—Mardy and Swed Meley's killer. Coming down the street. The way they walked—the rifle in Beam's hand— I knew something dreadful was going to happen. I followed. I thought my uncle was here. I knew he had planned on meeting Mr. Marlin at the stage office, before going—" she shuddered. "Before going to the Red Palace!"

Marlin's voice came from twisted lips. "They left—your uncle and Harry. Before Mardy went out to get Beam. I didn't know. Didn't suspect. To get his stage driver, Joe, the fat, super clenched his teeth as pain wracked him. The rain washed blood from his lined face. He looked up into that circle of faces. Into Cords impassive countenance. "You—*you* killed Beam?"

Cord shrugged.

Across from Cord a man in a long slicker said: "Margot—I jest seen yore uncle. An' Harry." The man's face held shame in it. Shame and a sullen fear. "They were comin' out of Lodestone Alley. Headin' for the Red Palace. Harry was packin' a box—"

His voice dribbled away. He stared, as did the others, at the buckskin clad youngster. Cord had gone rigid, a low growl escaping him. Strange lights played fitfully in his tawny eyes.

The girl looked up into a suddenly hard, ominous face. Cord's voice, flat and deadly, was asking: "Yore uncle—he's Cole Lemery?"

The girl nodded. The group was quiet, a tautness gripping them. Chilling them. The harsh breathing of the wounded man sounded loud in the pounding rain.

The girl's whisper was a ragged cut of sound. "You know him?"

Cord's cougarish figure seemed to flow into ominous slouch. The girl stiffened, shrank back, at the look that warped his handsome face—the hate that blazed in his eyes.

"Yeah. I know him!"

He was gone then, into the whip of the rain slashed street. The heavy roll of the thunder seemed to die away in a giant's laughing mutter.

THE street before the Red Palace was quiet, deserted, a sea of mud and puddles. The rain whipped against that dark, wet bulk with gusty fury. The cloth sign flapped, flapped, flapped—straining against its mooring ropes.

Cord took the five stairs to the porch in one tigerish bound. The slanting rain tapped against the slatted doors. Swayed them.

Realization came to the hard faced youngster at the last moment. He forced himself to pause. To reload with wet, steady fingers.

A thin splash of light was in his face. A shock of wet hair hung down over one eye. He shook it back with a quick head toss.

A voice dribbled out to him as he plucked heavy slugs from his gun belt—a voice that was like iron in its grim hardness.

"Sure, Swed—this is the end—for both of us." The pound of rain filled the moment's silence. The voice came again. "Long ago I took an oath, Swed. An oath of office. That don't mean nothin' to you, Swed. It did, to me. I promised Cibola law an' order. Law an' order, Swed. I failed.

Even Cord was gripped, momentarily, by that voice. By the intensity of it. And he felt a slow wonder as he

balanced before those doors. A wonder at the courage of this man he knew to be Cole Lemery. Eleven years had built another picture in his head.

That barroom interior was rigid with terrible strain. Why? Two men could not have held it so. Not with that bunch. Guns should have been blasting now. Cutting Lemery down.

The marshal's voice ripped into that strained silence. "What's the matter, Swed. Yuh seem to have lost yore nerve—yore guts!" A mockery was in that tone now. "Have yuh forgotten those guns on yore hips? The guns you boasted were gonna blast me down?"

A vicious bolt of blue cut down out of that black sky. Meley's answer, if there was any, was lost in the thunder that ripped the night apart.

The batwings buckled under the thrust of Cord's hand. And he was in, a tigerish figure in soaked buckskin.

The overhead lights burned coldly in a tension so palpable it could not last. The six gunmen he had seen, earlier, at the bar, were spread out along the stairs. Another was with them—the thin, big hatted figure who had been posted on the porch to watch for Lemery. Rigid figures they were. Hands close to guns they were afraid to draw.

The sharp-faced man with the black coat and the crossing gun belts was alone by the roulette table. He was balanced on his toes, like a hawk posed to strike. Green eyes burned desperately. Frozen, immobile, he waited.

AT the bar end nearest the gambler, a bitter-faced man held a Colt lax in his fist. A smile that was half sneer lifted the corners of his bitter mouth.

At the other end of the bar the brawny barman crowded the shelves. A horrible fear was frozen on his face.

And Cord saw it. That which held those guns from blasting. The box on the bar top, close to Harry. Square and wooden, gleaming wetly in the light. The black lettering said: Handle Carefully. DYNAMITE.

Harry's gun was pointed toward it. Carelessly. As though it were an ordinary, empty box.

But Cord, in that first flick of his eyes over the room, read the grim fatalism in Harry's eyes. Read suicide in them.

A cold chill washed the youngster. And then all was wiped away—gunmen, saloon, dynamite—as he faced Cole Lemery.

He knew it was Lemery, that big man in the room center, whose guns were sheathed. Wisps of boyish memory came to him. Lines in his face had not changed him. Nor the years taken the solidness from him.

Eleven years. But words would not come to Cord. Words fitting that long, terrible hate. He said: "Lemery, I've come to kill you!"

It sounded strange. Very strange. Eight other men were in this room, waiting for a chance to do that very thing.

Lemery's face changed. The broadness and the lines of it. Changed with an incredible surprise.

"Payson. Monte Payson's boy!" And then—"Nan's boy!"

Hell surged through Cord then. As though his mother's name on Lemery's lips fanned eleven years of brooding hate to quick flame. "Yeah—Nan's boy. The woman you left die in a burnin' ranchhouse. Monte Payson's boy—come to pay the debt his father can't!" The youngster laughed in white, tight-lipped fury. "With yore own gun, Cole, I'm goin' to kill you!"

Lemery's great body was rigid. His eyes burned beneath heavy brows—twisting fires of incredulity. His face was gray, shocked, in the yellow glare.

The rain pounded against the building. The sound of the flapping sign was a monotonous, steady thing.

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"Lord, kid—no!" The words wrenched from Cole's lips. He seemed to have forgotten where he was. The wolves waiting to strike. "You don't believe that. Kid—" Unheeding he started toward Cord. His eyes were shocked. "Kid—yore mother—she was—"

Cord's voice cut through Lemery's words. "Damn you, Cole—draw!"

THE fury in his tone stopped the big marshal. Froze him. Slowly he shook his head. "No, kid—"

And then the play was taken from Cord's hands. Taken with the abrupt suddenness of striking wolves.

From the bar Harry's voice ripped: *"Cole—"*

The warning in the voice spun Lemery about. He got one glimpse of an opening door on the balcony—a bearded face—a flaring gun.

Lead raked a deep gash in his wide face. Spun him off balance. He hit the edge of a heavy table, and went down. The table piled on him.

Cord surged, swiftly, his gun lining toward the overturned table. Death rode him. His father's voice was in his ears. Eleven long years of it.

But he didn't get his chance.

The bearded man on the balcony shot again—at Cord. The slug burned a gash at the base of the youngster's bronzed, powerful neck.

The youngster swiveled. The gun in his hand barked.

The slug made a mess of the bearded face. The killer dropped his Colt over the balcony, and fell after it. His body hit the edge of the bar, near the rigid barkeep, and slid off.

The room was shuddering to the smash of many guns now. Cord twised out of his gunsmoke. In a blurred glimpse, as he started for the overturned table, he saw Harry. Backed against the bar like a stag at bay. And over to one side the wolfish man with the long sideburns crouched, pumping slugs into him.

Harry's features had a smile pasted on them. Even as his face distorted with terrible effort the smile remained. His gun tried to level on the hump-shouldered gambler. But it seemed that every gun in the room was blasting at him.

Cord saw him beaten back against the bar. Saw him go down.

THEN the human wolves by the stairs were blasting at him—and at Lemery, heaving up behind the table.

Faced with death from those spitting guns the youngster forgot Lemery. He crouched, a wild figure in wet buckskin, a snarl riding his bronzed face. Coolly, he emptied his gun.

But the odds were too long.

A slug slapped Cord out of his crouch. He went down, lights bursting in his head. He rolled, kept rolling, toward the poker tables. Blood came out of the gash on his head. It tasted warm and salty on his lips.

His body hit something. He pushed up, spilling a table.

On his knees he shook his head, trying to clear the fog from it. And suddenly he became aware of a strange silence. The room seemed suddenly heavy with it.

His gaze cleared. And he saw it. Harry's last play.

The guns by the stairs were silenced, held in the icy grip of that strange race.

A wolfish figure, his guns empty, was humping toward that bar, toward the wooden box lying innocently on the counter.

Swed Meley almost made it. He bent over it, curled long arms around it. One twist, and he would be over the bar, dragging that road of high explosives with him, out of danger.

And then he sensed, rather than saw, Harry move. The miner should have been dead. His body was literally riddled with lead. Something beyond the power of flesh lifted him. Lifted his gun.

(Continued on page 109)

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(Continued from page 107)

Fear twisted Meley's face into a horrible mask.

Harry's gun boomed. Meley jerked, sagged over the box. The smile was still pasted on Harry's features as he pulled trigger again.

The bar, the box, Meley's body, seemed to vanish in a sheet of flame. A heavy, blasting sound dwarfed everything, ripped the saloon apart.

RAIN BEAT INTO Cord's face. His head ached horribly. His eyes opened, and figures swam before them. Voices were distant, blurred sounds.

He tried to move. His right arm stabbed pain through him. He relaxed. Slowly the fogginess cleared again from his eyes.

The crackle of flames came to him. He could see them, licking up into the sullen sky. Figures were around —dark, moving, talking figures. "Hell—" a man was swearing. "It don't seem possible—anybody comin' out of thet—alive!"

Things came back to Cord. And condemnation gripped him. He thought of a scarred man, up on the rimrock, waiting. He tried to twist, get up.

A low voice soothed him. A small hand held him down.

For the first time Cord realized his head was pillowed against something soft. He looked up. Margot's face smiled down at him, a little wan.

Around them men moved. A shadowy, slickered figure said: "Hello, kid. You were damn lucky. Yore skull's near split open, an' yuh got a broken arm. Outside o' thet, an' a few scratches—" the vague figure shrugged, turned to someone lying on a canvas by Cord. "C'mon, boys—someone give me a hand. We got to get Lemery inside. Get him patched up. Let that rat's nest burn!"

Cord twisted. Lemery? Lemery was alive!

The marshal's hard face met his. The twisting flames carved shadows

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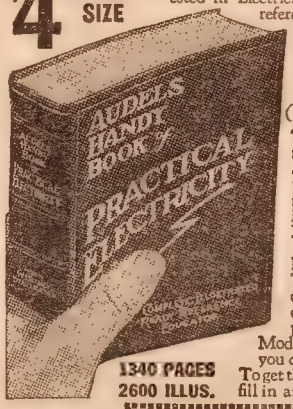

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in his face. There was a long rip in his face, along his right cheek. Cord knew there were slugs in his body.

The man's eyes seemed to hold him. Seemed to want to explain.

The slickered figure bending over the marshal suddenly straightened. A cry had gone up from men near the burning wreck of the Red Palace. Someone was stumbling out of that roaring inferno. Men jumped forward, pulled that blackened, screaming thing to safety beyond the licking flames.

THOSE hardened gold-towners shuddered at the sight. Mardy Villon was almost unrecognizable. The clothes were burned from his blackened body. His hair was gone. "Monte—" he babbled. "Monte—no—no" His voice shrieked across that street.

"I didn't mean to burn you. Monte—I swear." His voice dribbled incoherently, wild, utterly agonizing. Men shook their heads. His words were meaningless to them. But Cord was a taut figure, staring at that screaming, charred man.

On the outskirts of that crowd a shriveled figure, leading a horse, paused, held by that wild voice. It was Monte Payson.

"I knew you'd find out I took the money, Monte. I was desperate. I framed Cole. I got one of his guns. That night I was gonna fix it so it'ud seem Cole took the money. I knew the way you an' Cole felt—after you married Nan. You hated him—because he loved Nan. You never forgot that, Monte."

The crowd was silent, held by that revelation. The scarred man unnoticed on the fringes of the group did not move. Only his hands moved, clenched tight.

"I slugged you, Monte, when you surprised me at the desk. With Cole's gun. You fell against the table, spillin' the night lamp. I saw the fire start. I heard yore sick wife call—an' I ran away. Left you there, with

the flames lickin' up—with Cole's gun beside you—"

Slowly Cord eased back into Margot's arms. He turned his pounding head. His eyes met the marshal's.

Cole smiled, wanly.

The voice babbled on—and on—rising, broken with pain— For a long time it mingled with the crackling flames. The rain settled to a steady downpour.

A figure loomed before Cord. Scarred, hunched. The light was in Monte's face. The wildness, the madness was gone from his eyes. Regret was in them. He looked down at the man he had hated for eleven years.

His voice was low. "I'm sorry, Cole."

Cole's head rolled, weakly, in dismissal. He tried to lift his right hand. Monte bent. Gripped it.

Margot brushed wet hair from Cord's eyes.

There would be peace now. She knew, with a woman's intuition. The dying of those flames was like an omen. An omen of the future of Cibola.

She realized, now, the meaning of peace. The price of peace. With blood and iron it had to be won. And held.

In those flames that were a pyre for Meley and his killers she seemed to see a face. Harry's face. And the bitterness was gone from it. And he was smiling down at her.

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4919 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

MAIL APPLICATION Now!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

1 Write Your Full Name And Address Here

Name .....
(State whether Mr., Mrs. or Miss.)

Address .....

City and State .....

2 How Much Time Can You Devote to Coffee Agency?

Mark with an "X"

FULL TIME: ☐ PART TIME ☐

{ Full time pays up to $35 to $60 in a week, Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to $22.50 in a week. }

3 State Which Bonus You Prefer — Cash or Ford Automobile

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of $500.00 or a brand new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ $500 CASH BONUS; ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN.

4 Can You Start AT ONCE?

Mark with an X. ☐ YES. ☐ NO.
If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

TEAR OUT AND MAIL THIS APPLICATION AT ONCE TO

ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Rush! **ALBERT MILLS, President, 4919 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio**